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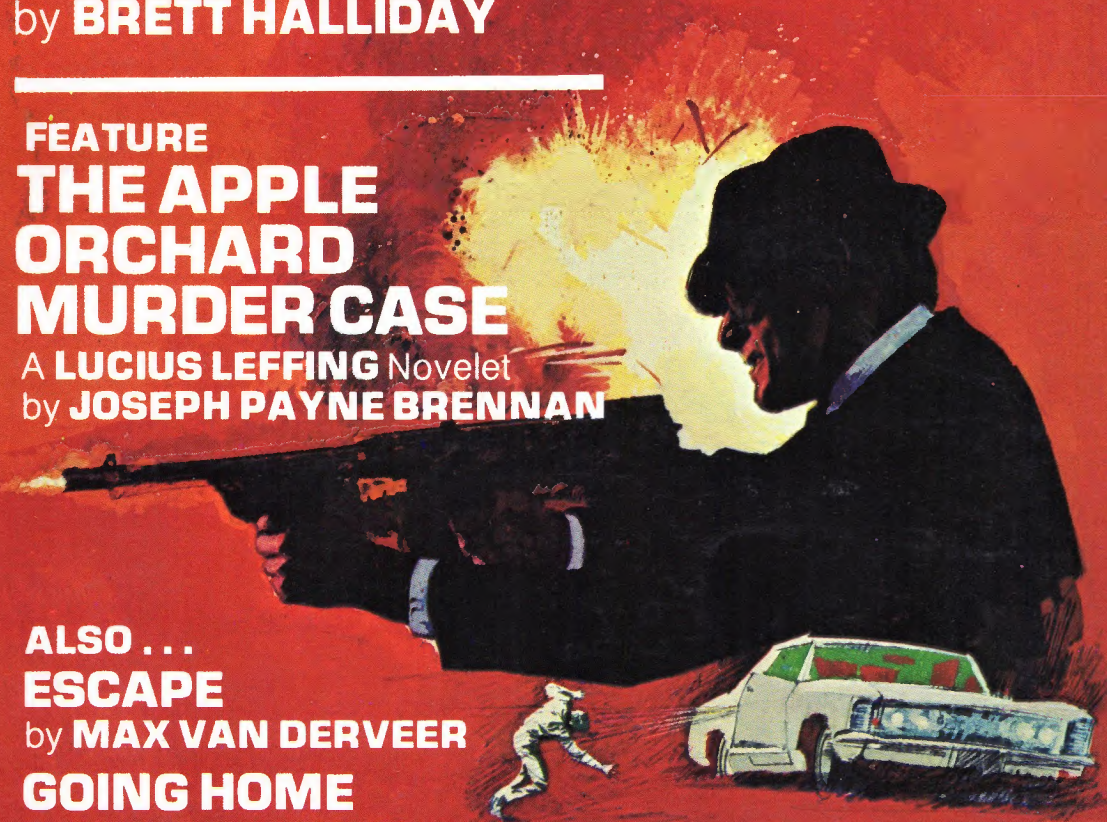
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MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



JULY, 1975
VOL. 37, NO. 1

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

THE CASUAL KILLERS

By BRETT HALLIDAY

Nobody likes being shot at—especially when fishing from a grassy bank. So when an unseen sniper removes his hat with a rifle bullet, Shayne is boiling over for action. However, the redhead gets more than he bargained for when he finds out the hard way that a certain unknown ill-wisher has laid a twenty-grand contract on him with every Miami motorcycle mob.

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LEO MARGULIES

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CYLVIA KLEINMAN

Managing Editor

LAURIE ROSE

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Complete

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

Every motorcycle gang in Dade County goes gunning for Mike Shayne, who has a twenty-thousand-dollar contract out on his scalp. But nobody seems to know who laid the contract on him, and time runs out while murders keep piling up in his wake . . .

by BRETT HALLIDAY



RIGHT AT THE MOMENT, big Mike Shayne didn't look like the ace private detective of the South Florida Gold Coast. Actually, he didn't look like a detective at all, but just an ordinary man getting ready to enjoy a couple of lazy hours in the late Dade County afternoon.

There was really nothing but his size to distinguish him from any other of fifty cane pole fishermen between this spot and the Miami City limits. Like them, he had pulled his car off the Tamiami Trail on the canal side. He picked a comfortable spot on the bank, baited his

hook with a shrimp bought at a bait store in town, sat down and waited for a bass or perch to provide some action.

A bit to his right and rear on the other side of the road, the ramshackle frame buildings of the Big Frog Bar and Indian Curio Store baked in the heat. There were a couple of cars in the parking lot plus eight or nine big shiny motorcycles painted an identical fire engine red.

Cars went past on the Tamiami Trail, making droning sounds with their tires on the hot concrete. Traffic was light

THE CASUAL KILLERS



at this time of day. Overhead the sky was clear except for a couple of big dark thunderheads building up far to the West over the Everglades.

Shayne leaned back and began to relax. He tugged his old felt hat down over his brow to shade his eyes.

Without warning, a bullet

ripped through the crown of that hat and almost tore it off his head. There was no sound of a shot, the growl of a truck engine a little way off could have masked it, but the crown of the hat had a neat hole that had not been there when he put it on.

Mike Shayne rolled over on his stomach and flattened himself on the canal bank. Off to his left, a little foreign bug rattled away towards town. To his right the big trailer truck was coming up—still more than a hundred yards away.

Nothing else moved. Nothing at all. It was all very peaceful indeed.

That is, except for the unmistakable bullet hole in the crown of Shayne's hat. An inch over and the hole would have been in his skull instead.

After a while, when nothing else moved but a car or two passing on the highway, Mike Shayne got up. He walked slowly over to where his car was parked and opened the trunk. There was a thirty-eight caliber snubnosed revolver inside in a clipon soft leather holster. Shayne clipped the gun to his belt under his jacket, just back of his right hip.

At that moment, some sort of fish, either a big bass or an equally sizeable gar, swallowed the bait he had left in the wa-

ter and took off up the canal. The unattended cane pole slid off the bank when the big fish made its rush and was dragged along on top of the water.

Mike Shayne watched it go without regret. Then he crossed the road to the Big Frog Bar.

The front window of the saloon was very dirty and obscured by posters, old menus, empty bottles. The big man could not tell if anyone was watching him from inside. He walked around the building and found a rear door that led into the kitchen. The place was filthy. A big pot of coffee simmered on an old electric range. Outside of that and a stack of dirty dishes and skillets there was no sign the place was inhabited.

A door at the front of the kitchen was unlatched. Shayne opened it and walked through. He found himself behind the bar, a little to the right of the ranked beer taps.

The bartender was a big swarthy man sitting on a stool beyond the taps. When he saw Shayne, he started to get off the stool and at the same time reached for a sawed-off double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun on the shelf under the bar.

Shayne beat him to the shotgun. He broke it open to eject the two shells and then dropped it on the floor behind him. The

bartender changed his mind and a switchblade knife appeared in his right hand. The four-inch stiletto blade flicked open.

The detective fainted with his right hand. The knife flashed up. The big man kicked the bartender in the groin. The fellow lost all desire for further fight. His face went chalk white as consciousness left him and he crumpled onto the floor. His body flopped convulsively and then was still.

Mike Shayne put both hands on the bar and looked out over the room. Two middle-aged tourists, a man and a woman, had been drinking beer over by the window. They got up and left their unfinished glasses on the table and scuttled out the door, got in their car and raced the motor away towards Miami.

Nobody cared.

There were eight men in black leather jackets drinking whiskey around a big square table at Shayne's left. They obviously belonged to the motorcycles outside.

Shayne tried hard to remember if there had been eight or nine bikes parked outside the bar. He couldn't be sure.

The men in front of him ranged in age from middle thirties down to about sixteen. They had a certain wildness in common. The older ones were



unshaven—one with a long yellow beard. None had washed recently. A couple showed the effects of the whiskey they had been drinking.

There was a fairly good chance that all were armed with knives, brass knucks or even guns. Their leather jackets could hide a lot. Shayne looked at them across the bar. They stared back impassively. It was a Mexican stand-off.

Finally, the detective said quietly, "I've got just one word for you boys. Don't try it again. Don't ever try it again."

They looked back at him. Nobody even said, "Don't try what again?"

Either they knew he was talking about the shot which had torn the crown of his hat—or they didn't care.

Then he said, "Go on home.

This bar's closed for the day." That was their chance to rush him if they planned to.

He couldn't tell from their faces what was going to happen. They were like some feral, cautious, breed of animal that could be very dangerous.

Then the one with the yellow beard got to his feet. "We got no quarrel with you, mister. Come on, gang."

He started for the door and the rest of them followed him. Shayne came around the bar and went to the front window when he heard the cycle engines revving up in the parking lot. The leather-jacketed riders rode out of the lot and turned East towards Miami.

Shayne counted. There were nine of them now. There had only been eight inside. That meant one had stayed in another part of the building or off in the Everglades sawgrass and brush while the big private detective had been inside.

The odds were one hundred to one that the ninth rider was the one who had taken the shot at Shayne on the canal bank. The big man hadn't even managed to see his face.

Shayne considered getting into his car and chasing after the cycle riders. They had hit full speed by now, though, and had a head start that would make it almost impossible to

catch them. If he did catch up, they were all wearing goggles as well as the identical leather jackets and helmets. He wouldn't be able to tell one from the other—and it would do him very little good if he could.

Short of searching them all and finding a gun with one shell fired—or recently fired if it was an automatic—he would have no proof, and even that would not be enough to take into court.

The detective was fairly sure that one of the bike riders had tried to kill him. By appearing inside the Big Frog Bar and facing them down, he had let them know what he felt. For the moment that was all he could do.

He still hadn't the slightest notion which one had fired at him. Just as important from the big man's point of view, he had no idea *why* any of the riders should want him killed.

Up ahead on the road to Miami, the bike pack had picked up speed and was almost out of sight.

II

THAT WAS WHEN big Mike Shayne became aware he could still hear the roar of cycle motors—and that these were coming up on him from behind. Normally Shayne wouldn't

have cared—but under the circumstances the sound alerted him. He watched them grow in his rear view mirror.

There were about a dozen riders, three or four with women riding pillion on the jump seats. This lot had their cycles painted yellow and wore tan leather jackets with a yellow stripe across the chest. They had on yellow helmets and big goggles obscuring their faces.

As the gang caught up with Shayne's car, he was driving at a normal pace and making no effort to avoid them, they separated so that some would pass on each side of the car. None of them *seemed* to be paying any special attention to the big detective's dark sedan.

However, one of them was. As the cycles roared past a rider on the right side tossed something through the open window of the car onto the front seat. Then the roaring motors were gone in a bunch.

Shayne's big hand shot out to grasp the object that had been thrown into the car. His fingers told him it was only paper fastened around a small rock by a rubber band. If it had felt like a grenade or a stick of dynamite, he would have thrown it out of the car again.

As it was, he held on.

When he reached a spot where the shoulder of the Trail

was wide enough, he pulled off the road and parked. The paper was a note with the words crudely printed in black ink from a felt-tipped marking pencil.

Shayne, it read, you're dead. Yes, Mr. Shayne you are dead even though you still walk around. The riders have marked you for death. Next time it will be a bomb, Shayne. Next time you will really be dead.

That was all. No signature. Shayne hadn't really expected one. He sat there and looked at the paper.

An hour before, Mike Shayne had been stretched out on the grassy bank of the Tamiami Canal for an afternoon of rest and relaxation and cane pole fishing in the warm sun. Now his hat had been torn by a bullet. Two separate gangs of cycle riders had given him very special attention indeed.

Somebody wanted Mike Shayne dead.

He didn't know who it was. In fact, he didn't have any idea who it might be. He was between cases. It could be any of a hundred persons out of his past, of course . . . persons whose plans he had thwarted or whom he had brought to justice in the course of his work over the years.

That thought was small comfort. He could hardly look them

all up again. He had no idea where to start. Before he could analyze the danger Mike Shayne needed one vitally important piece of information which he most certainly did not have.

He needed to know *why* someone wanted him dead that badly.

With a motive, he could put an identity to the shadow who had unleashed the bike riders upon him. Or, with an identity, he could find a motive.

He had neither—and his own life was at stake.

"I'm pretty sure it's not the bike riders themselves," Shayne told his beautiful secretary Lucy Hamilton later that evening.

They were having dinner at one of their favorite places—the Steak House in Downtown Miami—and Shayne had finished telling her the events of the afternoon. They were eating two-inch-thick top sirloin strippers in a booth in the main dining room off the bar.

"What makes you think that?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"Because if either of those two gangs had really wanted to finish me off, they certainly could have managed the job," the big man told his lovely companion. "Remember there was only one shot at me on the canal bank. I was right out in

the open there. The sniper had plenty of time for a second shot or even a third before I could get under any sort of cover. He could see I was still alive—but he didn't try again. If he had really wanted me dead, then why no follow-up shot?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Lucy Hamilton said.

"I did," said Shayne. "Then, when I went into the bar, not a one of them seemed surprised. They sat there like they knew all along I was coming. They didn't attack me, either. They were eight to one and you'd think, if they'd wanted to kill me, those were real good odds for a try." Shayne grinned his crooked grin.

"They never moved," he continued. "Then, when the second pack caught up with me coming back to town, they could have tossed a hand grenade or a couple of sticks of fused dynamite onto the seat beside me just as easily as that stupid rock with the note. If I was really meant to die, that's almost certainly what they would have done."

"I still don't understand," Lucy Hamilton said. "Are you trying to tell me it was all fun and games?"

"No," Shayne said, "it wasn't fun. It was a real bullet that ruined a perfectly good hat. I simply think I wasn't supposed

to be killed right then and there."

"Then what . . . Why . . . ?"

"I don't really know, Angel," the big man said. "All I *do* know is that, when a lot of things happen that don't really seem to make any sense, there has to be a reason why. In this case, I'd say it was a smoke screen to cover up something that *does* make sense."

"What could that be, Michael?"

"I don't know—but I've got a real good hunch I'd better find out. If I wait till it happens, it could be too late."

Not five minutes later the waiter came to their table carrying a phone. "Call for Mike Shayne," he said. "I'll plug it in here."

"Shayne here," the big detective said when the instrument was activated.

"Good!" the voice on the wire said. "This is Stan Berg. You know who I am?"

"Sure I do." Stan Berg was a sports reporter, and a good one, on the staff of one of Miami's best known TV news programs. "What's on your mind, Stan?"

"*You* are," Berg said. "You are, old buddy. The word is out around town that your health is declining but good and but fast. They say your friends should get ready for a funeral before long. Is it true?"

"Who says it is?" Shayne was wary.

"Let's say it's on the grapevine," Berg said. His voice was neither friendly nor unfriendly. "If I knew who started it, I'd tell you, Shayne. I've got no reason not to."

That was true enough as far as the big man knew.

"I believe you," he said. "I suppose you're talking about the motorcycle riders?"

"You're ahead of me there," Berg told him. "All I know is, some of my news sources say there's a contract out on your head. A big contract, Shayne . . . in the high G's."

"Interesting," said Shayne, "but you know it's happened before."

"I guess so, with all the heads you've broken and the big fat toes you've stomped in this town. I guess you've had it happen more than once."

There was admiration in Berg's voice. Then he continued, "The question is, can you handle it one more time. The grapevine says you can't. It says you're going to be run ragged first and then killed when you're all worn down. It says the price is so high this time that there's too many takers for you to handle."

"That remains to be seen," Mike Shayne said. "What else did the grapevine tell you?"

"That's all, old buddy," Berg said. "Nothing specific. What's this about bike riders?"

"Oh, nothing," Shayne said. "I almost got run over, is all. Probably no connection at all. Anyway, thanks for the tip."

"*De nada*," Berg said. "Always glad to pass on a tip to an old buddy—even if it is the news he's going to be hit. Seriously though, the best of luck."

The wire went dead.

"What was *that* about?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

Shayne told her.

"That sounds serious, Michael. What are we going to do?"

"First of all, I'm going to finish my dinner and have a double order of pie à la mode."

They didn't have a chance to do even that much without interference.

III

MIKE SHAYNE was only half through his pie when he saw the young man enter the dining room and look around. The big detective spotted him instantly. He was wearing a sports shirt, slacks and jacket instead of the black leather jacket and boots of the afternoon—but it was the yellow-bearded leader of the red cycle pack.

The beard saw Shayne and Lucy and came over to their

booth. Without asking, he pulled up a chair from the nearest table and sat down. Lucy Hamilton looked at him with surprise, but took her cue from Shayne and said nothing.

The new arrival was about thirty—too young for his beard and too old for the boys he rode with. He looked Shayne over for a minute.

Then he said, "I just wanted to tell you I'm not to blame for what happened this afternoon."

"If you aren't, then who is?" Shayne asked him bluntly.

"I'm not sure—and that's what bothers me," the yellow beard said. "I'm supposed to call the shots in our crowd, but somebody shot at you on his own."

"Don't you know your eight boys that well?" Shayne asked.

"Seven boys." The beard corrected him. "There's only eight of us counting me."

Shayne didn't correct him. But he knew that nine riders in black jackets had left the Big Frog Bar ahead of him that afternoon. Nine riders—not eight.

Yellow Beard continued, "I suppose you know by now there's an open contract out on you. Twenty thousand dollars to whoever kills you. All the motorcycle gangs in South Florida have been told. And *that* bothers me."

"I'm glad to hear it," Shayne

said. "Offhand, I'd figure *I* was the one to be bothered. So why does it upset *you*? Afraid you can't collect."

"I don't even *want* to collect," the Beard said. "I meant it when I said we had no quarrel with you. I'm not a killer anyway—just a rider. It bothers me that somebody thinks the riders would kill you."

"Who *is* this somebody?"

"I don't know, Shayne. Honestly I don't—and that bothers me, too. All of a sudden, everybody knows there's a contract out on you, but nobody seems to know who started the story."

If you did kill me, there might not be a payoff. Is that it?"

"No, that's *not* it. I told you I'm no killer. It's only that somebody's trying to use the cycle riders, and I resent that. Some of the riders think they'll make a game of it—harry and roust you till you don't know which way is up. Then a killer can hit you easy. They think it's funny. I don't. I came to warn you."

Shayne was almost beginning to like the obviously confused but well-intentioned young man.

"Thanks," he said. "I appreciate it. Who are you, anyway?"

"My name's Harry," said the other. "Harry Comfort. I don't



suppose it means anything to you. They call my riders the Beard's Boys. Incidentally the contract on you is open—not just for riders. At least, though, you won't need to worry about my boys. We aren't in on it."

"One of you was this afternoon," Mike Shayne reminded him. "I've got a ruined hat to prove it."

"It won't happen again," Harry Comfort said. He got up from the table and left the restaurant...

Shayne and Lucy finished their meal in silence. Both of them realized a very serious situation indeed existed. But, from long and loyal association,

there was no need for words between them.

After the pie Shayne had coffee and a cigar. Only then did he speak.

"I'll take you home, Angel," he said. "I don't want any over-enthusiastic bike riders playing games as far as you're concerned. Some of them play pretty rough. I don't want to worry."

She said only, "I understand, Michael."

"I have to find out who put out that contract," Shayne told her. "That has to come first."

He paid their check and they went out the rear exit of the Steak House to the parking lot. There was a little knot of people around a dark sedan standing in the rear of the lot. There was also a parked police car and a pair of uniformed officers.

The dark sedan belonged to Mike Shayne. The policemen were pulling a body out of the rear seat onto the cement of the parking lot.

The body belonged to Harry Comfort. Even from a distance it looked very, very dead.

Someone had cut poor Comfort's throat. There was blood in his beard and all down the front of his clean shirt and jacket. Lucy caught the big man's arm.

"Oh, my God!" she gasped.

Shayne kept his head. "We'd

better get out of here, Angel. Around the building to the Boulevard where I can hail you a cab. Take it straight home. When Will Gentry's boys come looking for you, just say you don't know a thing. Tell Will that I'll be in touch when I can."

When Lucy Hamilton was safely in the cab, Shayne boarded a bus going north on Biscayne Boulevard. He needed time to think, and the car would be traced to him within minutes. Someone in the restaurant would remember that the dead man had been sitting with Shayne and Lucy. The waiter knew who they were. So did the cashier, who saw them at least a couple of times a week.

Will Gentry was an old friend, as well as Miami Chief of Police. He would hardly believe Mike Shayne had murdered a man—particularly in the way this one had been murdered. Shayne wasn't the sort to cut throats and the Chief and most of his men knew that well enough.

On the other hand, Gentry couldn't help but order a pick-up-for-questioning order. The county sheriff and the Miami Beach Chief, who both disliked the big detective heartily, might improve on that and put out All Ponto Bulletins for him on suspicion of murder.

To be picked up at all could be fatal for the big redhead at this point. He figured he could clear himself of a homicide charge easily enough. After all, he and Lucy hadn't left the Steak House till after the killing.

The real trouble was that he couldn't afford to be held anywhere while answering questions. He needed to be free to find the man who wanted him killed badly enough to put out a twenty-thousand-dollar contract. He had to find out where the bike riders fitted into this bizarre picture. As far as Mike Shayne knew, he had never had any quarrel with bike riders as such.

They were a wild crowd, some of them perfectly capable of killing in a fit of passion, but hardly capable of anything of this sort.

Harry Comfort was already dead to prove it.

Shayne wondered about that, too. Had Comfort been killed by his own gang or by other bike riders or by someone completely unconnected with the riders?

On the surface, his death so soon after talking to Shayne and Lucy may have meant that someone didn't want him talking to the big detective. Or perhaps someone was punishing him for having talked. Or it could be something purely per-

sonal, unconnected with Mike Shayne at all.

At least, though, the killing of Comfort gave the big redhead a point from which to start his own investigation. It gave him a place to begin.

Shayne stayed on the Metro Bus until it had passed North East 79th Street. Then he got off and walked over to an apartment building owned by a friend for whom he had done favors in the past. It was a row of efficiency apartments surrounding a court—and with the tourist season as poor as it had been of late, there were vacancies.

Shayne had no trouble renting one.

Doing this gave him the two things he needed most at that moment—privacy and a telephone. He called his Old friend Tim Rourke, ace feature writer for the *Miami News* and talked at length.

Then he called another old friend, B.J. (Betty Jane) Ramirez, a stunning redhead who had inherited and ran one of the area's most active "Numbers" banks.

Four more calls to contacts around town followed.

At the end of an hour on the phone, Shayne had a pretty good briefing about the location, habits and personalities in the area's numerous motorcycle

gangs. He had names and addresses. He also knew that by this time word of the contract on him was common knowledge all over town. Everybody knew about it, but no one knew the identity of the individual who was willing to put up twenty thousand dollars to have him killed.

"It doesn't make any sense at all, Mike," Betty Jane told him. "Why those spooks on the bikes? If I wanted somebody killed, there are a dozen known hit men in town. They're all pros, some of them really damned good. Any one of them would be a better buy than those gangs of crazy hopped-up kids."

"Maybe somebody thinks I'm a pro too," Shayne said. "I *know* the hit men. I know how they operate. I could handle them—but amateurs!"

"That's not it, you big lug. If I thought *that*, I'd import a hit man from Chicago or the West Coast. Somebody whose face or M.O. you don't know. I still wouldn't stir up those kids with the bikes."

"Well," Shayne said, "the man isn't you. He did stir up the riders. Maybe he thinks there's so many of them they can be dangerous for that reason."

"I don't think that's why he's doing it," she said. "I'm going

to try and find out, though, so keep in touch."

Tim Rourke had told his friend much the same thing. "Nobody knows why the cycle gangs are in this, Mike, but they sure are. Their favorite bars are packed and gangs of them are riding. The police can't watch them all. It's like they were mobilized for a war."

"With me as the enemy," Shayne said.

"Right," Rourke told him. "If I were you, I'd keep an eye out for more than bike riders. Could be they're supposed to divert your attention while an out-of-town hit man sneaks up on your blind side."

"I don't intend to have a blind side," Shayne said.

IV

SHAYNE DIDN'T TELL any of the people he talked to where he was or what his plans were.

As a matter of fact, he wasn't yet too sure of what those plans really were. He only knew that he had to take positive action. It wasn't in Shayne's nature to sit passively by while danger came to him.

Far better to take the initiative . . .

As a first step, he sent the owner of the apartments out to rent him a car under his friend's name.

Shayne usually drove a conservative dark sedan. The car he rented was a fire-engine-red foreign sports model that could outrun a cycle on the open road in case of need.

The biggest gang of riders in the area were known as the Blue Devils. It was characteristic of Shayne that it was to their headquarters he headed first...

The gang hung out at a roadhouse called The Blue Hades on a back road north and west of Miami near the little town of Dania. Shayne had no trouble locating the place.

He parked his car at a small shopping center a little way down the road and walked back to the bar. There were at least twenty cycles in the parking lot and he could see the jacketed riders and their girls drinking at the bar inside. He could sense their aura of excitement.

The obvious leader of this gang was seated at a table to the left of the door. He was older than the others, with a stubble of black beard and the cruel, hawk face of a ruffian used to command. He wore a crimson silk shirt under his leather jacket, and a couple of big diamond rings sparkled on his fingers. There was the bulge of a holstered gun under his left armpit. Two other men and three women sat with him.

They were all about half drunk by the look of things. They were not expecting trouble.

Shayne came in the front door of The Blue Hades like any innocent stranger looking to buy a beer. He moved so smoothly and with such precision that none of the mob inside realized how fast and dangerous he really was—let alone recognized him for the man they were all supposed to be after.

Shayne got around behind the boss of the Blue Devils before any of them noticed him. He dropped his huge left hand on the man's right shoulder in a grip that partially paralyzed the rider. At the same time Shayne's own right hand dipped under the man's jacket and came up with the fellow's holstered gun. It was a heavy frame .357 Magnum with all the chambers loaded. A gun that could break a man in half at the sort ranges inside the crowded room.

Shayne's thumb cocked the gun with a click of metal as he pressed the muzzle to the back of the hood's neck. It was all done so fast and so smoothly that even the others sitting at the table didn't realize until their leader was disarmed and helpless. They stared—open-mouthed.

The crowd at the bar didn't

realize anything had happened at all.

Shayne pulled a chair from an adjoining table and sat down on the gang leader's left side. His right hand kept the gun nudging the man's spine. He said, "I understand you boys are looking for me."

The gang boss said, "What in the hell do *you* want?" His face had gone white under the stubble of black beard.

"I'm Mike Shayne," the big redhead said. "You've heard of me."

There was dry menace in his voice.

"You know me all right," he went on. "I'm Shayne—and for twenty thousand dollars I won't pull the trigger of this gun. For twenty thousand dollars, I won't break your spine and blow your heart out the front of your chest."

The rider boss said, "Hold on, hold on! Man' you're crazy."

"I'm not crazy," Mike Shayne said. "I've got the gun. I'm the one can pull the trigger and blast your guts out. I don't think that makes me crazy."

"That makes you crazy if you think I've got twenty thousand dollars," the rider said. "No way, man, do I have that kind of bread. No way at all."

"That's funny," Shayne said. Everyone at the table could hear him. "Some of you want to

pay twenty grand to have me killed. I figure it's only right I should charge you twenty big ones not to kill you. I mean, since there's that sort of money floating around the riders, it seems only right I should get it. Since it's me that has you under the gun. This way it seems only right."

He spoke slowly and clearly, so the rest of them could hear. By now, the crowd at the bar had spotted him and were watching.

Nobody made any overt moves. The gun at their leader's back made sure of that. The room was silent except for raucous music from the juke box. Someone reached over and pulled the plug out of the wall so that the music stopped.

The gang boss said again, "You got to be *crazy*, man! We ain't got bread like that."

"Then you're dead," Shayne said. "You're dead unless you've got something to trade that's worth twenty G's to me."

"Anything," the other said. "Anything we got is yours when you take that rod off my back. You name it, man."

"Information," Mike Shayne said loudly enough so that all of them in the room could hear. "I want to know who put the contract on my head. Give me his name and maybe it's worth your life."

There was a silence broken only by hoarse breathing and the sound of an occasional car going by outside.

"We don't know," the man under the gun said. "You got to believe me, man. All we know is the word went round. The hit and the price. Nobody said who put it up."

There was a chorus of agreement from the others in the room.

Mike Shayne believed them. Like everyone else he'd talked to this crazy day, they just didn't know who wanted his life. He was beginning to feel desperate, and he fought to keep a clear head.

He tried again.

"All right then, think. Think hard and come up with something that will buy this man his life. Who has that sort of money that's connected with you riders? Give me a name."

He expected them to name a bike seller or a bar owner or someone in the dope-pushing business. But nobody answered.

An answer finally came after a couple of minutes of silence. The speaker was a blonde girl at the table with the leader.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know if this will help. Most of us ain't rich. We come from ordinary folks. The only one who has money is Harry Comfort—that I know of. Him



and that snooty sister of his, I think they're rich."

"Harry Comfort?" Shayne asked.

"Only Harry Comfort is dead already," said a voice at the bar. "You killed old buddy Harry, didn't you, Shayne?"

They looked at him with mixed expressions. Shayne got to his feet. His left hand caught the gang boss by the neck and hauled him up, too.

"I'm taking your friend out the front with me," Shayne said. "If anybody moves—if anyone of you even breathes hard—I'm going to pull the trigger."

"We'll come after you, Rocky," one of the men called.

"For God's sake, no!" their leader called back. "This guy means business. Stay right here. Freeze!"

"What if he kills you, Rocky?"

"I haven't killed him yet," Mike Shayne said. "If he and you all behave yourselves—then just maybe I won't kill him. Just maybe. It's still a real temptation."

There was a clear lane to the front door and Shayne walked the leader of the Blue Devils out and onto the street. He could feel all of their eyes on his back, but his big hand holding the gun was rock steady.

Nobody dared to challenge him.

Shayne walked Rocky a few doors down in the direction away from where he had left his rented car. He didn't dare stay on the street too long, because he couldn't be sure how long the other riders would stay inside.

Shayne pushed the man called Rocky into an alleyway between two stores. As soon as they were well off the street, he went into action. The gun butt caught Rocky back of the ear and knocked him out cold.

Shayne pushed the body of the unconscious cycle gang leader back of some trash cans, where he would be out of sight of his friends until he came to

his senses. Then the big detective circled back through the alleyway behind the Blue Hades to where he had left his car. He drove away just as the bike riders boiled out of the roadhouse.

As far as he could tell, none of them spotted him in the rented red sports car.

V

SHAYNE WAS dissatisfied with the results of his confrontation. He had made some points in this grim game, of course. The word would get around town—and fast—that Mike Shayne was no frightened pigeon to be harried and roused for sport. Once the riders accepted the fact of the danger, he figured most of them would leave him alone.

From now on, he'd be bothered only by the more desperate types out to collect the twenty-thousand-dollar bounty they believed had been put on his head.

That simplified things for both sides.

On the other hand, Shayne was no closer than he had been to finding the information he had gone looking for. He still didn't know who had put the price on his head, or why it had been done. Till he did find out these things he was still run-

ning blindly in the dark from a menace that he could neither name nor come to grips with.

That didn't feel right for Mike Shayne. He had to switch the roles so that his enemy would be running from him.

For lack of a better lead, he decided to go see "that snooty sister" of the late Harry Comfort. She might not know who was after Shayne herself—but perhaps she could tell him who had really killed the man with the yellow beard, her brother. That would be one more link in the chain.

Luckily, Harry Comfort was listed in the Miami phone book. The address was in a development of expensive homes just north of South Bayshore Drive and the Mercy Hospital properties. Whoever said Comfort and his sister were well-to-do had been right. Any house in that locale would go for one hundred thousand dollars and up in the day's inflated real estate market. A strange home for a black-jacketed bike rider.

Mike Shayne parked down the block and walked up to the house. He had half-expected young Harry's death might have filled the place with grieving, or at least curious friends and relatives, but this did not seem to be the case. There was only one car—an expensive American sports job—parked in

the driveway, and a glance through the picture windows in front showed the living room to be empty.

Mike Shayne went quietly up the path to the front door and rang the bell. Almost at once he heard footsteps approaching from inside the house.

The girl who opened to his ring bore a general family resemblance of feature to the late Harry Comfort, but the details were subtly different.

Her features were cameo beautiful—a young oval face under masses of coiled black hair. She wore a tight pants suit of burgundy red velvet, accented at the waist by a belt of gold chain with a gold clasp set with pearls and amethysts. Her shoes were soft black leather. She had jeweled rings on both hands. To any regular bike rider, she would be "that snooty sister" and no mistake.

Her eyes were her most striking feature. They were grey with flecks of gold like a cat's eyes and just as intelligent, ruthless and inquisitive as those of one of the big hunting cats.

She looked at Shayne and said, "Yes?" with a question mark.

Shayne wasn't taking any chances of the woman recognizing him and slamming the door in his face. He pushed in past

her and closed the door behind him. She stepped back to avoid him as he came, but there was no fear in her face. The odd eyes were completely calm.

Shayne had an odd feeling that they would stay as icy cold if he struck her or if she suddenly produced a gun and shot him instead. For the first time in a long while, he was uncomfortable in the presence of another human being.

He said, "I have to talk to you, Miss Comfort."

"Obviously," she said in a low, musical voice, "but why?"

"Because I'm Mike Shayne," he said as quietly as he could.

Her expression didn't change. Her stance didn't alter, but the big man knew that every muscle in the lithe and beautiful body had come alert.

There was a small table against the wall to her right with a mirror hung above it. She didn't look at it. She was very careful not to look at it.

Shayne could move as quickly and smoothly as a big cat himself when he wanted to. He did so now. He got between her and the table with a couple of easy strides. He opened the table drawer and found the gun he'd expected. It was a flat black automatic, but it wasn't the .22 or .25 caliber popgun a woman usually owns and keeps. This was a .380 Browning—a

much more formidable weapon.

Shayne picked up the gun. It was almost swallowed up in his big hand.

He said to her, "I'm not going to hurt you and there's no reason for you to shoot me. I don't care what you may have heard. I didn't kill your brother."

She looked at him steadily across the few feet of expensively carpeted floor. Her strange yellow eyes didn't even blink. They just looked at him—and into him.

Then Shayne did a strange thing. He wasn't quite sure at the time why he did it—perhaps because he just wanted to see those eyes change expression. He tossed the automatic pistol lightly to her.

She caught it with one hand—easily, as if she'd handled guns often before—and looked down to be sure what it was. Then she tossed it onto a big couch in the living room.

Suddenly she smiled. Her lips and her whole face smiled and her body relaxed. Only the eyes didn't change expression. Shayne began to wonder if even death or the act of love could change their look.

At least the deadlock was broken. She continued to smile at him and said, "I think I believe you, Mr. Shayne. Even the police I talked to didn't

seem to think it was you who killed poor Harry. That other big man, Chief Will Gentry, was very positive about it. He said that if you killed a man it would have been either with a gun or your bare hands. That you weren't the sort to use a knife."

Shayne said, "And now that you see me?"

"Oh, now I believe him. I don't think you would have come here if you had killed Harry. I really don't. And besides—you don't look to me like a knife man."

Was that intended as a compliment or in mockery? Shayne couldn't be sure. Too good to be a knife man—or not good enough? Did this strange young woman know a knife man when she saw one? She didn't give him time to wonder.

"I'll accept that you didn't kill my brother," she said. "In that case what did you come here for?"

"I just want to ask you some questions."

She smiled again. "That's easy enough. Come along to the Florida room and I'll mix you a drink."

She sensed the question in his mind. "Oh, don't worry. We're quite alone in the house. Harry and I had no relatives in town and few close friends outside of that gang he rode with.

The police have the body—and you're the first who called to express sympathy."

There was no bitterness in that last remark. She simply said it.

Shayne let her lead him to the big comfortable Florida room facing out over a walled garden at the back of the house. There was a bottle of good brandy behind the built-in bar at one end of the room. Shayne poured himself a good three fingers and took some water in a separate glass for a chaser.

To his surprise she followed his example, tilted her head back and drank the fiery liquor like a man.

"Sit down," she told him. "Call me Sally, Mike Shayne, and ask me any questions you want. If I know the answers, I'll probably give them to you. I really think that I *will* give them to you."

"I'd appreciate that," the big man said and sat in one of the rattan easy chairs.

"Then fire ahead."

"All right. First of all, who did kill your brother?"

She threw back her head and laughed. It sounded like genuine mirth. Then she said, "Come off it, Shayne. People say you did. If I knew any different, I'd have told the police, believe me, I would. It wouldn't

be a dark secret to share with you."

"If you knew for sure?"

"That's right—if I knew for sure. More than that, I'd have told him if I had even a reasonably good suspect to offer. I don't want anyone making a habit of killing us Comforts. There aren't enough to go round."

"Then can you think of any reason why your brother was killed or who did it—or might have done it?" Shayne asked it quietly.

"Only some well educated guesses," Sally Comfort told the big detective. "He could have been killed because one of the other bike gangs knew he had been talking to you. It's possible one of them was following and saw you with him in the Steak House. On the other hand, it could have been because he wouldn't go along with the idea of killing you. His own riders knew he'd decided to have no part of that. They could have talked. Or one of them who was greedy for the contract money could have decided to get Harry out of the way."

"You don't seem to think much of bike riders in general," Mike Shayne said.

"I don't." She gave him a long, appraising look. "Most of them are no better than ani-

mals. I never approved of Harry running with them."

"Not even when he got to be captain of his own pack?" Shayne asked.

"Least of all when he got that bunch of bums to follow him. They just wanted his money. Didn't you know Harry bought the bikes and most of the equipment for them? It was costing us a fortune."

"He did that?"

"Of course he did. How else do you think a reasonably intelligent guy like Harry could get to be head of one of those brutal and stupid gangs except by buying his way in?"

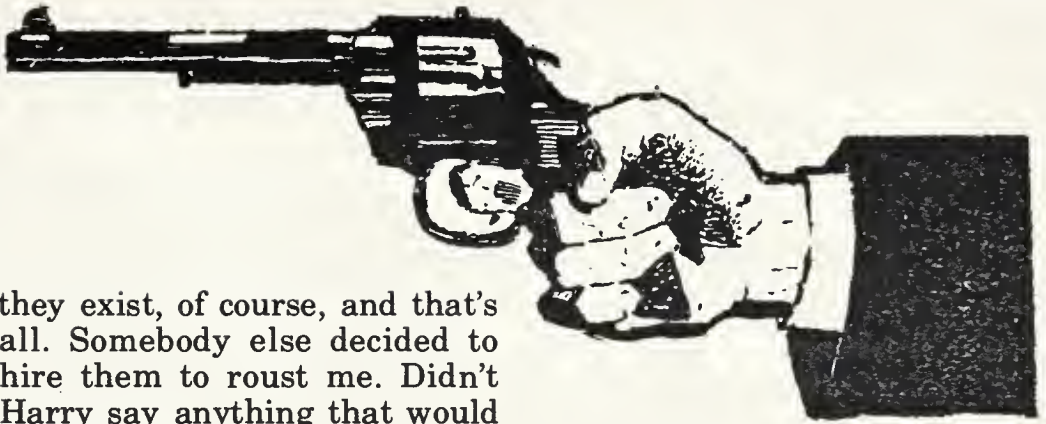
"I see," Shayne said. "That's why you think even his own boys could have cut his throat for him. Loyalty founded on money is no loyalty at all."

She finished her brandy. "That's the ticket, Shayne. Or it could have been any one of the other riders in town. They all hate and envy each other. They're like a pack of wild beasts among themselves. Stupid, bloody animals!"

"So which of them put out this contract on me?"

"I should think *you'd* know that," she said. "A smart man like you, Shayne, should know your own enemies."

"Usually, I do," he admitted. "I know I have no enemies among the bike riders. I know



they exist, of course, and that's all. Somebody else decided to hire them to roust me. Didn't Harry say anything that would give you a clue."

"No," she said, "and I'm sure it was because he didn't know himself. He got the word from the other captains. That's all I know. He asked me if I knew who you were and why someone would want to kill you. I told him a man in your job has enemies."

"I have to find the man who put out the contract," Shayne told her.

"I can understand that," Sally Comfort agreed. "Why don't you let me help you?"

"Help me? Why should you?"

"For one thing because, whoever he is and whenever he wants you dead, the guy is responsible for my brother's murder. If he hadn't stirred up all this mess, Harry would still be alive. You got to admit I owe for that. Besides, I like you, Shayne. I don't want you in trouble for something I don't really think you did."

Shayne was silent. What

Sally Comfort was saying did seem to make sense. He pulled at the lobe of his left ear with the thumb and forefinger of one big hand. She took his silence for assent.

"I can be more help than you think," she said earnestly. "I never rode with the gang myself, but I've heard Harry and his pals talk. I've even met some of the others. I know who most of the leaders are and where they hang out and what sort of people they are. I can be a big help."

"Maybe you could at that," Mike Shayne admitted thoughtfully.

"Sure I can. Just try me."

"The first thing I need is a chance to talk to any of the riders who might have a clue to who wants me dead. Can you set that up?"

"I think I can do better than that," she said. "There's a place

where the captains meet when they want to talk things over quietly among themselves without a big mob of the stupid around. On a night like this, it's a hundred to one that's where they are. Do you want to go see?"

Mike Shayne said, "Let's go."

VI

THEY TOOK Mike Shayne's car. Sally put on a lightweight black trench coat over her flamboyant pants suit. She also put the .380 Browning automatic into her big brown leather shoulder bag. She left all the lights burning in the home she had shared with her brother.

Their destination turned out to be a combined restaurant and bar on U.S. Highway #1 past Perrine on the way to the city of Homestead. It was a place famous for its steaks and patronized by a well-heeled and free-spending clientele.

Sally Comfort laughed at Mike Shayne's expression when she named it.

"It's not the sort of place you'd expect to find the riders," she said. "As a matter of fact, most of them never heard of it and couldn't get past the door-man if they tried. It's only the captains who come here, and they meet in a private room upstairs. One of them is a

nephew of the owner, and that's how the connection was made. It's a sort of neutral conference spot. No rough stuff is ever tried here."

"I wouldn't have thought of it," Shayne said. "You're already being a help."

She was sitting close to him in the rented car with her shoulder and thigh both pressed against his. Now she looked up at him, her face near his, provocation and invitation in her eyes and voice.

"You see," she said in a low, musical intonation, "I told you I can be a help. Maybe I can be more. I don't know yet, but I do know I'm really beginning to like you. So who knows."

Mike Shayne kept his eyes on the road and his hands on the wheel.

There was ample parking in the lot behind the restaurant and Mike Shayne put his rented sports car in a spot from which he could make a quick exit in case of need.

There were other cars in the lot, but no motorcycles.

"You think they're here?" he asked Sally Comfort. "I don't see any bikes."

She laughed with real amusement.

"You *are* funny!" she said. "We drive cars too, you know, and I recognize a couple over there. There's a meeting on to-

night, okay—but don't look for leather jackets and boots when I take you in."

They went in by the front door where Sally Comfort conferred briefly with the maitre d'. The man listened respectfully, then motioned them to go up a stairway to the left of the entrance.

At the top of the stairs they found themselves in a hall lined with the doors of private rooms. Sally Comfort knocked on the door of room number four.

One—two—three . . . One—two . . . One—two—three . . .

The door was opened from inside and they went in. There were three men seated at a long table with drinks and ashtrays in front of them. The man who had opened the door was obviously the waiter who had brought the drinks. He was on his way out.

The men at the table knew Sally. She pointed to each in turn. "Rocco Baldoni," she said, "Sam Smith, Pete Reilley." Then she paused, added, "Boys, I want you to meet Mike Shayne."

One of them said, "Oh, hell!"

The one named Rocco said, "Sally, I always thought you were nuts and now I know it. What's all this about."

The third man moved to drop his hands in his lap. Shayne

produced the .357 magnum he had taken from Rocky earlier in the evening. One second, his hand was empty. The next moment, the big gun was under their noses. It seemed to appear there all by itself, like something in a professional magician's repertoire.

The three motorcycle captains were duly impressed by this legerdemain.

"All hands on top of the table," Shayne said in deep, authoritative tones. It was a voice that carried a clout all its own.

"I didn't come here to use this thing," he told them, "and I won't unless I have to. All I want is to talk. If we can settle this thing peacefully, it's to your advantage as well as mine."

"He means exactly that," Sally Comfort told her friends. "I wouldn't have brought him here if I hadn't believed him. You know me."

"We know he killed your brother," one of them said. "How can we talk after that?"

"I didn't kill Harry," Mike Shayne said. "Why should I? He'd just finished telling me he wasn't after my head. Besides I was eating pie inside when Harry died."

"I believe him," Sally said again.

Pete Reilly said, "You do. Maybe I do, and maybe I don't."

"At least, talk with him," Sally said.

"I guess we can do that," Rocco Baldoni said, "at least as long as it's him that has the gun on us and not the other way round."

"So what do you want, shamus?" Sam Smith asked him coldly.

"All I want is information," Shayne said. "I want to know who started all this. I didn't. I've no grudge against the riders, but now it looks like I have to shoot some of you to save my own neck. I don't think any of us really wants that. Just tell me who put the contract out on me, and it takes both of us off the hook. I want *him*—not *you*."

"We don't know who it is," Rocco Baldoni said.

Shayne said: "Hell! All I get from any of you is you don't know. If it's true, you're stupid as so many Barbary apes in the rocks. Suppose one of you *should* kill me—who does he collect twenty thousand dollars from? Is Mister Mystery going to walk in and introduce himself and pay off?"

"Do you really think your Mister X is going to be fool enough to pass out that sort of bread when you don't know who he is? More likely, you'd be left with a Murder One rap to take care of and no payoff at all. Right?"

"It does sound reasonable," Sam Smith said.

"I never thought of it that way," Baldoni admitted.

"I did," Sally Comfort said. "That's why I figure we had better help him. Does one of you know who put out the contract?"

From their silence it appeared nobody did.

"It was just all round town," Pete Reilly said. "Everybody seemed to have heard of the contract all at once. I just assumed somebody had to know who put it out."

"That kind of assuming is dangerous," Shayne said.

"Against somebody like Mike Shayne it can be very dangerous," Sally Comfort said. "Think hard. Who would know?"

They sat and thought, with their hands on the table and a wary eye on the gun the big redhead held. Finally Rocco Baldoni broke the silence.

"I honestly don't know, but if it was me, I think I'd ask the old man. He might know if anyone—"

The door was snatched open from the hall side and another man ran in. This one wore his jacket and boots. He was out of breath from running.

"Calm down, Ed," Baldoni said.

The man fought for breath.

When he saw Shayne, he pointed. "Who's that?"

"That's Mike Shayne. We're just talking over a deal."

"Oh, God!" Ed gasped. "You can't deal with Mike Shayne!"

"What do you mean we can't? We are."

"Did he tell you he dropped over for a chat with Rocky at the Blue Hades? Did he tell you that?"

"He told *me*," Sally Comfort said. "So what has that got to do with this? I brought Shayne here because I wanted to save everybody trouble."

"Oh, sweet . . ." Ed said. "But did he tell you all about Rocky? Did he . . . ?"

"What's all this about?" Mike Shayne demanded.

"It's did you tell her the whole thing?" Ed said. "Did you tell her how, after the talk was over, you took Rocky out in the alley and killed him? Did you tell her how you cut Rocky's throat, just like you did her brother's? Did you tell her and the boys about that, Mr. Shayne?"

VII

THERE WAS a long silence while emotion built up in the room like an electric charge in a battery. Mike Shayne could feel it. He could see it in their faces.

"He never told me!" Sally

Comfort said. "I swear to God he never said anything about killing Rocky."

"I didn't kill him," Mike Shayne said. "I knocked him out so he couldn't point the rest of his gang to me. I knocked him out and somebody must have found him there and cut his throat—that is, if his throat was cut. I don't use a knife."

"Oh, sure," Reilly said. "You didn't cut Harry Comfort's throat and you didn't cut Rocky's. You don't even use a knife to cut meat."

Baldoni said, "It looks like we're going to have to kill you after all, Shayne. Even if there isn't any twenty thousand dollars to cut up, we're going to have to kill you anyhow. We can't have you cutting throats all around like that. We can't."

They looked at each other across the table. Shayne held the gun rock steady. For the moment, the gun was checkmate—but he could feel the charge build up. These were reckless and emotion-packed men with violence in their blood.

When the charge built up past a point of no return, they'd be at his throat like wolves. They were probably armed—and they were four to one—even if Sally Comfort stayed neutral.

Sally was beside him—on his side of the table where he

couldn't watch her and the men too.

"This is stupid," Shayne said. "If I was the sort of man you think, you would have just committed suicide talking that way. I have six shots in this gun and only four of you to put down. I can't miss."

They thought about that and some of the rage in their faces changed to fear.

As long as Shayne could keep on top of the situation, there was a chance he could get out of the room without open violence. Either that, or he'd have to kill some of these men. Shayne was capable of killing if he had to—but he was not the man to enjoy it. For him, killing was a last resort, to be used only after every other alternative had been tried and failed.

He took a chance now—a calculated risk designed both to save Sally Comfort's "face" with the rider captains and to get them both out of the room without a battle.

"You can think what you want," he told the men, "as long as you stop with thinking it. Make a move, and I'll kill the lot of you."

He could see that they got the point. There was hatred in their eyes, but the fear was gaining.

"I'm leaving here right now,"

Shayne said. "I'm taking the lady with me just so nobody will get any bright ideas about chasing us. Try that, and she'll be dead."

"You stay right here for half an hour. After that you can do as you please. You can even try chasing me if any one of you is crazy enough. But remember this, though—I can take you and any of your men, and I will if I have to."

"You pass the word around to leave Mike Shayne alone. There's no reward for the man who catches up with me. There's nothing but a bullet in the gut, and that I can guarantee the lot of you. Just stay clear of me and let whoever started the story about that twenty grand contract come and try to make the hit for himself."

He hoped they heard him. Even more that they would believe what they heard—enough to sit tight.

Shayne made a show of putting his gun to Sally Comfort's back as the two of them left the conference room.

Inside his head, there was still a question mark. If it *had* come to a shootout, whose side would the beautiful girl have actually been on? It had better have been his, or he'd have been a dead duck with her gun behind him.

Now, he supposed that he'd never know.

Anyway, she came along quietly. While they were in the room, she gave no sign of being anything but an unwilling victim.

They had one close call in the parking lot. A couple of County Sheriff's deputies had just parked their car and were headed for the kitchen door to pick up a couple of steaks "on the house."

Shayne put his arm around Sally's shoulder and bent down as if whispering in her ear. It hid his face, but it probably wasn't needed. The two deputies paid them no attention at all. Their minds were on other things.

Shayne got his car out of the lot and into the highway traffic without being noticed.

"Who's the old man?" he asked Sally.

"Who?"

"The old man that Baldoni referred to back in the room there. The one he said would know about the contract if anybody would."

"Oh!" she said. "I'd forgotten. He's the one who fences most of the stuff the gangs steal—when they do stage a ripoff. He Shylocks for them, too, when they need money. Loans at very high rates."

"I see," Shayne said. "If



something goes on, he's the one who knows."

"Exactly. If anything happens, somebody's bound to mention it. The riders are in and out of his place all the time. It's a neutral ground when two gangs are at war with each other. They both need him, so they keep his place safe for all."

"Just the man I want to see," Shayne said. "Who is he, and where is this place of his?"

"His name is Simon Kane," Sally said, "though nobody ever

calls him anything but the *Old Man*. He has a garage and bike sales agency out in the northwest section and a home not far from that. His biggest ripoff though is fencing and loan sharking for the gangs. That's where his influence comes from, where he really makes his money."

"I want to see him," Mike Shayne said.

She looked up at him. "Did you ever consider he might be the one that put the contract out on you?"

"I consider everything," Shayne said. "I don't think that's the man though."

"Why not?"

"Because I can't think of a single reason why he should have done it. Nobody puts up that kind of money without a motive, and I can't think of a motive Kane could have. I never crossed his trail before—let alone did anything serious enough to make him want to kill me. Killing is serious. Your brother's bikeriding pals might not think so, but anyone with twenty thousand dollars to spend does. That sort doesn't put out a contract without a reason. What reason does the Old Man have?"

"I don't know," Sally said, "but on the other hand, can you give me a motive for anybody else tonight? You can't. The

motive is as secret as the man, so you can't really rule out the Old Man. Besides, who'd be more likely to put the cycle riders onto you?"

Shayne didn't agree with her line of reasoning. Anyone as close to the bike riders as Simon Kane, had to be the last man to use them to do a killing for him. It would just bring the police into his own private and profitable preserve.

He'd be much more likely to give an out-of-town hit man a thousand dollars to shoot Shayne in the back without fuss or publicity.

However, the big detective didn't argue with Sally Comfort. He stuck to his original point.

"I want to see him anyway—and that's where we're going."

"Not unless I call him first," Sally Comfort said. "His place will be full of bike riders—and by now they'll be ready to shoot on sight anybody who even looks like you. The killing of Rocky will have them all as dangerous as so many mad dogs. Your only chance to see the Old Man will be with some sort of safe conduct."

"What makes you think you can get me any kind of safe conduct?" he asked.

She said, "The same way I got you in to see the captains

back there. I'm known as Harry's sister. I never really rode with his people, but I've met most of them. I've gone to see the Old Man with Harry."

"What was Harry fencing?" He was probing for a reaction, and he got it right away.

"That's a low blow, Mike Shayne, and you know it. With the money we inherited from our parents, Harry didn't have to steal, and you should know he wasn't the kind to do it without a real reason."

Shayne said, "I believe you."

"That's better, then. No—Harry was always buying a new bike or boots for that bunch of hoodlums who rode with them. It was the only real hold he had on them. The only way he could be a captain was to throw his money around. That was his claim to leadership."

She spoke bitterly.

"Harry wasn't the first to buy a leadership position," Shayne said.

"He was the first in *our* family." She was still bitter. "Do you know what it costs to outfit a gang first class. I guess you don't, but believe me, it takes a lot of money."

"Harry could afford it, couldn't he?"

"That's all in the way you look at it," she said. "He paid his way without going to the

Old Man for a loan, but it couldn't have gone on much longer. After all, our parents weren't that rich, and the taxes and lawyers took a big bite out of what they did leave."

"I see."

"Anyway I *did* meet the Old Man. You better find a phone booth and let me call ahead though. And you'd better believe it's the only way you'll get to him alive tonight."

VIII

SALLY COMFORT had no trouble getting through to the Old Man at his place of business. Setting up a meeting with Mike Shayne was another matter, though. She had to talk hard to convince Simon Kane that Shayne just wanted to talk.

Finally he agreed to let Sally Comfort bring the big detective to his home. The Old Man would wait there and talk with them.

"He's got more sense than the rest of them," Sally Comfort said.

"If he didn't have, he wouldn't be head man." Shayne agreed.

"Anyway, he listened to me," Sally continued. "I'm not sure he really agrees that you didn't kill Rocky, but he'll go along with me that you didn't cut Harry's throat. Anyway, he'll

talk to you—and I think that's important right now. You convince him, for he's the one man in town who can take the cycle gangs off your back. They will listen to him."

"I hope they will," Shayne said. "This crazy feud over nothing has cost two lives already. So let's get on with it." ...

Shayne found Simon Kane's house easily enough. The outside yard lights were on and so were the lights inside. There was no sign of an ambush, so the big detective parked in the driveway beside Simon Kane's late-model Lincoln. The two-car garage made one wing of the house and was obscured from the street by a cement wall and some ornamental planting about ten feet high.

"He wants to talk to you alone," Sally Comfort told Shayne as he parked. "I'll wait for you in the car." She reached over and pressed his big hand with her small soft one, added, "Good luck, shamus. Good luck."

Shayne had to walk back down the drive to the street and then around the wall to get to the front entrance of the expensive house. The door opened the instant he rang.

"Come in, Shayne," said Simon Kane. "Let me get a look at you."

The bike riders' Old Man had the look of any successful Dade County businessman. Short, stocky, balding, he wore an expensive sports shirt and slacks and soft leather sandals on his feet. His glasses were in solid gold frames and there was a heavy gold ring on his right hand with at least a two-carat diamond.

"Come in, come in," he repeated. "We can talk freely here tonight. I live alone and my servants have gone home. No guards and no bugs, Mr. Shayne. Just you and I to talk."

Shayne said, "That's fine. I hope we can clear this up once and for all."

His host led him through the living room to the rear of the house. There was a semi-Florida room—part pool and patio arrangement. The rear wall was screening backed up by ornamental tropical plantings. The rear of the house itself was a series of sliding glass doors opening directly onto the pool area.

Near the pool was a table and two wrought iron chairs. A bottle of rum stood on the table with two glasses.

"Pour yourself a drink," the Old Man said and seated himself.

Shayne poured rum into a glass. It was high grade imported Jamaica—not as good as

his favorite brandy but still a strong and warming drink.

"You're sure we're alone?" he asked.

"We are, as far as I'm concerned," Simon Kane said. "Nothing at all up my sleeve. How about yours?"

"Both of mine are empty, too," Shayne said. "Nobody came with me but Sally—and I told her to wait in the car. I wanted this to be private as much as you did."

"Fine, fine! Now why are you going around killing motorcycle riders, Mr. Shayne?"

"I think you *know* I'm not killing anybody," Mike Shayne said. He made it a statement, almost an ultimatum, and let it lie like something tangible on the table between them.

Simon Kane drank some of his rum—not very much—as a courtesy gesture to his guest. He looked over the rim of his glass at the big redheaded detective and took his own good time about answering. Outside, the hot tropical night seemed to brood over the house. The only sound was that of a television set in a neighbor's patio.

Finally the Old Man spoke. "You know, Shayne, I'm inclined to believe you. I honestly am—and that's what bothers me the most about this whole affair.

"If it was you by yourself car-

rying some crazy vendetta against bike riders—why, we could deal with that. Myself, I'd have you found and watched and tip the police where to find you. That would be reasonable man's way to handle you—and I'm a reasonable man, no more a killer than any other businessman. I'm no mafioso.

"Some of the boys and girls on the bikes might try to kill you, of course. If they did, I'd try to stop them," he added, "One way or another, we'd get you out of the picture. You'd have to be crazy to start a one-man war—and lunatics can always be handled."

"I agree with you on that," Shayne said. "My whole life has taught me the truth of what you say. Crazy killers go down fast.

"I'm not crazy, though, Kane. I'm not the one doing the killing. That complicates things. You don't know where to look. There's somebody killing bike riders and he's using all this ruckus about me to hide himself.

"I don't really know whether he wants me killed—or even whether it's you he wants out of the way. Right now, he's got us both looking over our shoulders. Maybe he thinks we'll kill each other off."

"I'm inclined to believe that may be it," Kane said. "If it is,

we'll fool him there, at least. Have you come up with anything yet, Shayne?"

"Maybe," Shayne replied. "Just maybe. Nothing I can really get my teeth into."

"I was hoping that girl you rode up here with could help you," Simon Kane said. "I've only met Sally Comfort a couple of times, but she struck me as a knowledgeable broad. She should have her heart in helping, anyway. Both the men killed were so close to her."

"Both?" Shayne asked.

"Sure, both. One was her brother and the other—that Rocky—either was or had been her boyfriend. Didn't you know that?"

"By God, I didn't!" Shayne spoke emphatically. "She never mentioned that!"

"Well, well, *well*!" Kane Said. "Perhaps there is something else I ought to tell you."

He never got the chance.

The shot came through the screened wall of the patio behind the still waters of the swimming pool. The screen held in and reflected the lights from the house. Anyone outside could see in, but Shayne couldn't see out.

The shot was from a small caliber pistol—perhaps a twenty-two.

It caught Simon Kane right in the center of his forehead.

Only one shot was needed. He was dead even as he slumped in his chair.

Shayne hurled himself sidewise out of his own chair and rolled over the sill into the living room through the open glass doors. Within seconds, he was sheltered behind a big overstuffed leather chair with his own gun in his hand. He heard feet running through the plantings toward the far end of the house.

Seconds later, a gun was fired twice out in front of the house. From the sound of the two shots, he figured that was the .380 Browning Sally Comfort had been carrying.

Half a minute later, he heard a motorcycle motor kicked to life partway down the block. Then the cycle roared away.

Sally Comfort did not fire again, but he heard her at the front door calling, "Shayne! *Mike Shayne*! Are you all right, Mike Shayne?"

IX

SHAYNE CALLED to Sally Comfort through the front door of the house and then opened it.

"Go back to the car," he said. "Start the engine and wait for me. I'll be right back."

He went out on the patio and wiped the glass he had drunk from and any other spot where

he might have left fingerprints. He did not touch the body. Simon Kane had died instantly and there was nothing that could be done for him.

Once clear of the house, Shayne lost no time in getting the car moving. Some of the neighbors must have heard the shots fired from Sally's gun even if the *pop* of the twenty-two which killed the Old Man had gone unnoticed.

Of course, they might not have called the police. Most people nowadays prefer not to get "involved" and might prefer to believe a car had backfired twice.

Still . . . Shayne couldn't count on that.

There was also the solitary bike rider to be accounted for. If he came back with his gang, Shayne preferred to be somewhere else.

Sally Comfort didn't speak until they had covered several blocks.

"What happened back there, Mike?"

"Somebody killed the Old Man," Shayne said. "Didn't you figure that out?"

"Yes I did," she admitted. "I heard a shot and then a man ran around the end of the house as I headed for the front door. He took off down the block and I fired at him twice. I wasn't really trying to kill him, of



course—just to hit his legs and stop him. I'm not used to a gun, though, and I missed. He got to his bike and took off.

"Then I called you. When you answered and there was no sign of Kane, I figured he had to be dead or at least badly wounded. Am I right?"

"Simon Kane is dead," Shayne repeated. "One shot into the brain right through the forehead."

"What will happen when they find him?"

"What do you *think* will happen?" Shayne asked bitterly. "The word will go round that I killed him, of course. Every place I show up tonight, somebody gets killed. Why would they blame it on anyone else this time?"

"I'm sorry," Sally Comfort said. She sounded as if she really meant it.

"I'm sorry, too."

"What are we going to do now?"

"I'm going to issue an invitation for whoever is behind this whole thing to come and get me," Mike Shayne said. "It's one of the oldest tricks in the game and I've used it before. It always works, because the killer can't wait for me to come get him. He thinks he has to come after me, so he does. That gives me the advantage."

"Once you bait the trap with yourself the other guy has to spring it? Is that the idea?" Sally asked.

"It's not only an idea," Shayne said, "it's a system—an M.O. as they say in the manuals—*modus operandi*."

"I know my Latin," she said. "But what if he doesn't come?"

"He will, because he knows that otherwise, sooner or later, I'll come for him."

"Suppose he hasn't left a trail for you to follow to him? Apparently this one hasn't. Everywhere we turn, we find ourselves in another dead end. This one hasn't left any trail at all."

"Don't kid yourself about that," Shayne said. "This one has killed or had a killing done three times already. He's left a

trail. All killers leave a trail. We haven't found it yet, but we will. We have all the time in the world. He doesn't. He has only till we catch up with him. Every second that passes cuts his time that much shorter. Sooner or later the strain will build up till he can't stand it any more. I know. I've seen it happen too many times?"

"Suppose it's more than one person?" Sally asked as they drove through the night. "Suppose one person put up the contract and somebody else killed Harry because he thought Harry was squealing? Maybe Rocky was killed by one of his own gang out of jealousy. He was a great ladies' man and ruled his pack with an iron hand."

"Suppose the one who killed the Old Man was trying to get you instead and hit him by mistake. They could have been three separate killings and not related to each other at all. Isn't that possible, Mr. Shayne? Can you say it isn't?"

"Of course I can't say that. I may even think it's the way things are, but it doesn't really change things. Whoever put out the original contract has got to find me to collect. He has to find me or send a hit man I can trace back to him. If there are other killers, too—then they have to find me or else risk my

finding them to clear myself. One killer or three, it's me they have to come to."

"You make it seem so simple and logical and deadly," she said and pressed her warm shoulder against his. "There's only one part of the whole thing that doesn't seem so simple and logical to me."

"What's that?"

"When he or they or whatever *do* come for you, Mike Shayne, how can you be sure they won't kill you? How can you be so cool and calm and absolutely sure about that? That's what I want to know."

"Don't worry your beautiful head about that," he said. "Leave that part to me. Murder's my business."

A few minutes he said, "There's only one thing I have to figure out right now—and you haven't mentioned it."

"Give me credit for *some* brains," Sally said. "You're wondering where you can go to wait for this killer to come and put his big foot in the trap you'll have all ready and waiting for him."

"Right," the big man said. "Normally I'd go home or stay with someone known to be a friend. I can't do that tonight because the police are after me, too, and they know all my places as well as anyone else in town. If I go to one of them, I'll

be picked up. They'll hold me a while for my own protection if for no other reason.

"No killer will come after me in a holding cell or in Chief Gentry's office. Of course I could hide out. I know places nobody could find me—but that defeats the whole idea. I need to *have* the killer find me."

"By this time everybody must know I'm with you," Sally Comfort said. "The killer will know it, too. Why don't you stay with me?"

"If the killer can figure I'm at your house, so can the cops," Shayne said. "That place will be staked out right now and I can't even go near it to take you home. I'll have to drop you where you can catch a cab."

"Forget that," Sally Comfort said. "I've gone this far with you. I'm not about to drop out and go home now. Besides I didn't mean to stay at our house in town. Harry has—I mean had—a cabin out in the Glades where we can spend the night. He and his boys used it for parties and as a hunting and fishing camp. It's not far out of town."

"What do you call far?" he asked her.

"One of the old loop roads this side of Forty-Mile Bend on one of the ponds in there. Take the Trail, and I'll tell you where to turn off."

"It sounds like a good spot," Shayne said.

"It is. The bike rider people know about it. They'd look for me there if they find the house in town staked out by the cops. If your killer is one of them and you're right about his having to come at you, this is the place to set a trap for him."

"You're awfully anxious to help," Shayne said.

"He killed my brother. Don't forget that," Sally said. "Besides everybody will know I've been helping you by now. That makes your enemies mine as well."

"I see."

"On top of that, I like you, you big lug."

"All right," Shayne said. "We'll try your cabin."

The Comfort fishing camp was reached by a narrow dirt road—more like a track—leading south for about a half mile from the Tamiami Trail. It followed a ridge of high ground through thick underbrush and scrub growth except at one point, where it was broken by a deep slough full of mud and water. This channel was narrow and crossed by a roughly built wooden bridge strong enough to support Shayne's rented car. The track then made a loop, still following the ridge and curving back to a small "hammock" or natural island

where the cabin itself was located.

The cabin itself was actually a mere few feet from the bridge, but could only be reached by following the long bend in the track. Anyone in the cabin could thus observe the bridge and anyone crossing it, but could only reach it by wading through the swamp—or by going back around by the track.

Shayne observed these facts with considerable interest while Sally Comfort opened the padlock on the cabin door with a key.

Inside, she lit a kerosene lamp so that Shayne could observe the rough but comfortable furnishings.

"This might help," she said as she opened the single closet in the place and produced a pump-action twelve-gauge shotgun and a box of shells. "Harry kept it for shooting birds and small game."

Then she poked about the closet floor again and came up with a box holding three sticks of dynamite together with loose caps and fuses. She held them up for the detective to see.

"I *thought* these were here," she added. "One of Harry's boys stole these from a construction site. They were always talking about using them to dynamite one of these ponds for fish and

'gator skins, but I guess they never got around to it."

She also showed him canned food and bottles of drinking water.

"This place is a regular fort," Shayne said. "If we had to, we could stand quite a siege here."

"So what do we do now?"

"We wait," he said. "Get some sleep if you can. It won't be long till daylight, and I don't really expect any attack till then. Whoever they are, they'd need light to work about in this swamp."

He turned out the light.

Somewhat to his surprise, she curled up on one of the bunks that lined two walls of the cabin. From her even breathing, she dropped off to sleep almost at once.

Shayne looked at the luminous dial of his watch. It was almost half-past three in the morning. Off to the east, the myriad lights of the city made a false dawn in the sky.

Shayne sat by the open window of the fishing camp, lit one of the big cigars he favored—and waited. Any danger had to approach by way of the bridge only a few yards away in the swamp. The bike riders were road people. On foot and in the swamp, they'd be helpless.

From where Shayne sat, he could observe the bridge.

A little after four o'clock—

when it was still dark—he heard motorcycle engines coming along the Trail from Miami. There were a lot of them and they made a lot of noise in the night.

He wasn't surprised when he heard the engines turn in off the Trail on the track leading to the fishing camp. About halfway in along the track they were all turned off. The riders would be covering the rest of the way on foot.

Shayne grinned to himself in the dark.

"They're coming, aren't they?" said the quiet voice of Sally Comfort from the bunk against the wall.

"Yes, they're coming."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to let them come," Mike Shayne said. "That's what this whole thing is about."

"You're that sure of yourself?"

"I'm that sure."

"From here, you can use the shotgun to keep them from crossing the bridge."

"I could use the dynamite to blow up the bridge—but why foul them up in the swamp. Besides, don't forget I've got a rented car on this side of that bridge."

"I don't understand you, Mike Shayne." Her voice in the darkened cabin sounded as if she meant that.

"Simply hang on," Shayne said. "You'll understand in a little while. I promise you that."

X

IT WAS only a little while after that when some of the bike riders began to cross the bridge under cover of the evening darkness. With their bikes back up the track, some of them actually took off their boots on the bridge itself and crossed in socks or barefoot.

They were as quiet as they could be. An untrained City man might possibly not have heard them come. But Shayne had the ears of a cat when he wanted. He figured twelve to fifteen men came over the bridge. More strung themselves out along the track and in the brush on the far side to cover the cabin from that angle.

He figured most of them would have firearms of one sort or another—probably for the most part, small-caliber pistols that would be innacurate at more than a few feet. Shortly after the attack party got across the bridge and took up position covering the cabin, dawn began to break in the east. It rapidly became light enough to see what was going on outside the cabin.

The bike riders were all un-

der cover—or thought they were. Shayne could locate two or three in the brush and could have picked them off easily. But that was not part of his plan.

"All right now, Sally," he said in a low tone. "It's time to start the ball rolling."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean, you're going to open the door and go out with your hands up."

"They'll kill me. They think I'm on your side now, and they'll gun me down as soon as I show."

"No they won't," Shayne said. "Those are hoodlums out there—not hit men. If shooting had already started, they might kill a woman. But it's not in them to do it in cold blood. Besides, the leaders know you. It would be like killing a friend. You'll be safe enough as long as you do what I say and as long as you do it right now before they get worked up any more."

"They think they have us trapped. That makes them overconfident. We can't give them too much time to get all blooded up. Above all, we can't let the shooting start first."

"What am I supposed to do out there?"

"Keep your hands up and keep your cool. Walk away from the door out to where they

are hiding. Don't walk so far that I can't see you and keep you covered.

"Call out to them. Tell them I'm inside and have been holding you prisoner. Say I know they have me trapped and I'm willing to give up . . ."

"What!"

"Say it," Shayne said. "It isn't so, but say it. Say I want to be sure of safe conduct back to the City Police and so I'll only surrender to their leaders. The leaders have to come in here with you and give me their word."

"They'll want you to throw out your gun first."

"I know," Shayne said. "I'll throw out the .380 Browning you have in your bag, and the shotgun—that should convince them. Now give me the gun out of your bag and get out of here with your hands up. *Hurry!* We've no time to lose."

Sally did as he said.

It seemed like an hour, but she was actually back in less than ten minutes. Shayne tossed out the pistol and shotgun as he had promised. He still had the .357 magnum he had taken from Rocky the evening before tucked into his belt under his jacket where he could draw in a split second.

Sally Comfort had three men with her. As he had expected, they were the three they had



met in the restaurant—Rocco Baldoni, Sam Smith and Pete Reilly. All of them had pistols hung from their broad leather belts.

Shayne met them one step outside the door of the cabin. What they did and said could be heard and seen by the riders hidden in the brush, but the three men and the woman were between him and them and shielded him against a shot from ambush. He wanted this little scene to be completely public.

"Good morning, gentlemen," Shayne said. "I'm glad you decided to accept my invitation to clean up this business once and for all."

"We'll clean it up," Smith said. "Hold out your hands to be tied, and we'll take it from there."

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Shayne said. "The killer is going to go back to town with you today—but that doesn't mean it's me."

He was watching them closely, praying none of the three would go for his own gun. He had to keep complete command of the situation or that would happen.

"Bear with me a minute more," Shayne said as easily as if this were a social gathering, "and I'll give you the killer."

"A few days back, somebody put out the word among all you riders that there was a big contract on Mike Shayne. It had to be somebody you knew and who knew you. A hint here and a word there would start it and gossip would pick it up. In hours, the word was all over town."

"It was put out by someone intelligent and careful—someone who had studied me and my habits down to my favorite fishing spot—someone able to guess correctly what I'd do next once the action began. It was someone who could ride with Harry Comfort's gang without being noticed. There were eight men in the Big Frog Bar yesterday, but nine riders on the road to town."

"What's all this getting to?" Baldoni asked.

"Hear me out," Shayne said.

"Somebody took a shot at me yesterday. The gun was a .380 Browning like the one I tossed out to you. The shot hit my hat."

"That same somebody followed me to town and was watching when I went to dinner. He saw Harry Comfort talk to me. When Harry left, the killer walked him to my car and killed him there. Harry didn't cry out or fight. It was someone from the riders that he knew and trusted. That someone wanted Harry killed in my car, so I'd be suspected by the rest of you."

"The killer tailed me from then on till I went after Rocky. I took Rocky into an alley and knocked him out. The killer saw me do that and cut Rocky's throat after I was gone."

"Why?" Baldoni asked. "Why?"

"I'm getting to that," Shayne said. "I was tailed to Simon Kane's place. The killer listened outside the screen. He was afraid that Kane would tell me his name, but before Kane could do that he was shot. Kane had a rider waiting down the street in case of trouble. The rider heard the shot, but then Sally here fired at him and chased him away."

"I had Sally bring me out here to wait for you. I knew who the killer was by then, and I wanted you to come so I could tell you fellows."

"There's one thing wrong with all that," Rocco Baldoni said. "If the killer tailed you all that time, he must have had plenty of chances at you. So how come you're still alive?"

"That bothered me, too, boys," Mike Shayne said. "At least it did until I figured out the killer didn't want me dead at all.

"This whole business of the phony price on my head was only to cover the real murder. The intended victim was Harry Comfort from the first.

"Consider that and everything else falls in line. Sally Comfort wanted her brother dead before he ran through all their money. I was to be the patsy for that. Who else could ride with his gang and know all of you?

"When I left Rocky in the alley, she got a bonus. Rocky must have been her lover and

turned her down or I miss my guess. She could settle that score and blame it on me again.

"Simon Kane guessed it was her. He was about to tell me when she shot him with a second gun she had in her bag. She ran out to the front of the house and fired at Kane's lookout but missed so he could get away and tell you I'd shot your Old Man."

"It's a pack of lies!" Sally Comfort cried. "Can't you tell it's all damn lies?"

"One of you go into the cabin and bring out her bag," Mike Shayne said. "You'll find a small-caliber gun with one shell fired. It'll match the slug in Simon Kane's head when the coroner digs it out."

Baldoni found the gun as Mike Shayne had promised. It was curtains for the blonde killer.

In the AUGUST Issue:

DEATH WEARS A VELVET GLOVE

The New Complete MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

By BRETT HALLIDAY

What bothered Shayne even more than his near-murder was the fact that everyone involved in the Oraba Island caper was simply too damned polite. Even when the bullets finally began flying, they were sophisticated—but lethal!

A Piece Of Rope

Two bodies lay in the morgue — what could possibly link the housewife and the crook together?

by HAL ELLSON

THE VILLAGE of Rios was old and still beautiful, but it was dying and half its houses stood empty. Stopping his car, Detective Victor Fiala looked across the road at the abandoned house. A well stood beside it, while a dozen orange trees and a staggered column of slender pomegranates displayed their startling scarlet blossoms.

Beautiful and sad, he sighed, and, starting the car, looked at the house again. Was someone watching him from there? In spite of the heat, he felt a sudden chill and decided to get out of the car and investigate. Turning the key, he stopped the motor.

There was no sound now and he felt the weight of the noon heat, while the flaming blossoms of the pomegranates contrasted with the glaring white walls of the house and its empty windows.

He decided no one was inside, and his eyes dropped to the naked rock across the road. There was his watcher, a lizard splayed upon the stone, studying him with an unblinking gaze.

Another detective, Fiala laughed and, with a movement too quick for the eye, the lizard vanished. Now there was only the silence again, the noon-heat and the flame of the pomegranates. He started the car, drove off and minutes later entered the village proper. The stricken deserted plaza, with its iron benches and ancient salt-cedars, burned in the sun. There was no police station here. Sheriff Pincay stepped through the doorway of a cantina, a tall slender man with a face like old leather.

Fiala braked the car, and the sheriff acknowledged him with a nod, then climbed into the

Featuring

VICTOR FIALA



front seat, gave directions and fell silent. Turning about, Fiala took the same road out of the village, passing the abandoned house where he'd stopped and others along the way. It was a beautiful drive, then, abruptly, they entered upon country, a wasteland where only goats could survive.

It was here that a boy herding a flock had found the body of the murdered woman. The sheriff pointed now, and Fiala braked the car. Fifty feet off the road two peons squatted, arms across their knees. They remained that way when Fiala and the sheriff approached: two silent figures, they were guarding the dead woman from the buzzards sailing overhead.

Gazing at the corpse, Fiala nodded. At least, the stinking carrion-eaters hadn't got their beaks into the woman. Young, her pretty face was unmarked, but someone had bound her wrists behind her and shot her in back of the head. Squatting now, Fiala examined the rope, then searched the area around the corpse and shrugged.

"The woman's from Rios?" he asked Pincay.

"No, senor."

"All right, let's go. The body'll be picked up shortly."

They returned to the village and the sheriff, getting out of the car, went back in the can-

tina while Fiala drove off to headquarters.

Montes sweltered in the heat, but unlike Rios, there was no silence there. Buses rattled and cars roared through its narrow crowded streets. Stopping in the main plaza, Fiala went for coffee. There was plenty of time before the dead woman joined the man who'd been brought to the morgue that morning.

Two murders, and both victims had been bound with rope and shot in back of the head. Did that mean anything? Stirring his coffee, Fiala recalled the two squatting peons and the buzzards waiting overhead for the dead woman lying in the desert.

Trussed like an animal with a piece of rope. A horrible way to die, he thought, and, pushing his coffee away, walked out of the restaurant into the blazing sun. Across the street in the plaza a bench awaited him in the shade of a sour orange tree. It was a good place to think, but he soon dozed off.

Later, a hand pressed his shoulder and he opened his eyes. A policeman stood over him. "Better wake up, Victor," he said. "They can hear you snoring at headquarters."

Fiala smiled and glanced at his watch. An hour had gone into limbo; the Chief would have his head. Mumbling his

thanks to the policeman, he hurried across the plaza to headquarters.

"You had a good sleep?" Captain Meza greeted him with from his desk. "Ah, you're slipping, Victor."

"A bad night," Fiala answered, flushing. "Did they bring the woman in from Rios?"

Captain Meza nodded and grinned. "But, of course. She's also been identified."

"Already? That was fast."

"One of our men recognized her. Carmen Valdez, the wife of Juan Valdez, a bellhop in the Hotel de los Reyes. Know him?"

"Only to nod to. Did he . . . ?"

"Kill her?" Meza shrugged. "He claims he didn't, but perhaps you'd like to talk to him yourself."

"Later. What did you get on him?"

"Nothing. He has no record, and he's a good worker, always on the job. He didn't know his wife was murdered."

"Nor missing?"

"No. According to him, they had an argument and she went to her mother's. He thought she was still there, but . . ." Meza didn't finish.

Fiala nodded. "Perhaps she had a boy-friend."

"Valdez doesn't think so. He was firm on that point."

"He could be wrong."

"Why?"



Fiala shrugged and said, "Let's go. I want to show you something."

TWO BODIES lay in the morgue, one of Carmen Valdez, the other Pedro Martinez who had been found that morning in a canyon south of the city. "Notice anything?" Fiala said.

"Both victims were shot in back of the head and their hands tied behind their backs," Meza replied and shook his head. "Don't tell me you're going to make something out of that?"

"I hope to," Fiala asserted.

"Ridiculous. We know what Martinez was."

"We do, but did Senora Valdez? Or perhaps she did know he was a bad one. If a woman falls in love, she doesn't care what the man is or does."

"True, but . . ." and Meza grinned. "You're on a wild one this time. I assume you believe they were lovers and Valdez caught them together and killed them."

"It may have happened that way. I don't know, but they're linked together, and the same man killed both of them. If you looked closely, you'd have noticed the victims were tied in exactly the same fashion, with the same knots and same kind of rope."

"The rope, knots and fashion of tying are pretty common, Victor, and apt to mislead. I'd say Martinez had a falling out with some of his friends and was taken care of."

"And Senora Valdez?"

"Perhaps her husband isn't as innocent as he appears. Perhaps he murdered his wife, but why put the two murders together? It's too far-fetched, in spite of the rope."

"A difference of opinion," Fiala said, and they left the morgue.

Captain Meza returned to his desk, and Fiala went back to

the restaurant. This time he finished his coffee and two cigarettes, then returned to headquarters to confer with Chief Lopez in his office. Lopez proved as skeptical as Meza. He saw no connection between the two murders.

"A petty hoodlum, and a house-wife. You can't link them together, Victor," he said. "Not with a piece of rope."

Fiala shrugged and left the Chief to his limitations. He hadn't expected much from him. Meza was a jealous fool, he thought, as he descended the steep iron steps from the balcony into the patio. Then out into the sun he stepped. The white light was blinding, but shaded benches encircled the plaza. He returned to the one where he'd dozed off, put on his dark glasses and lit a cigarette. Two people murdered, and justice like a tortoise, slow-moving but inevitable; he'd nod a while.

He closed his eyes, but couldn't nod off with two murders to solve. The house-wife and the petty criminal made an incongruous pair. Did the rope link them, or were Captain Meza and Chief Lopez right?

The pair of dark glasses he'd put on were not for concealment. He had good reason for donning them and now, directly across the gutter, Luis Cruz

stepped from the doorway of the Blue Moon restaurant and joined him on the bench.

"Have you heard about Martinez?" Fiala said, dropping his cigarette.

"I've heard. A bullet in the head."

"Correct. What was he dealing in?"

"Cigarettes from the States."

"Who was he doing business with?"

The informer frowned, for this was a painful question to answer. "The big one," Cruz finally replied. "Escobedo."

"I should have known that. What went wrong?"

"Who knows?" Cruz said, shrugging.

Perhaps he knew the answer, perhaps he didn't. Let it go, Fiala thought, and said, "What do you know about Senora Valdez?"

"Who is she?"

"She was mixed up with Martinez."

"If she was, I didn't know about it."

"Maybe she was one of Escobedo's harem."

Cruz shrugged again. "Perhaps. There are many in the harem, and who could keep score on them?"

Fiala thought about Escobedo, the untouchable, with a hand in everything, and a weakness for women. Did he

kill Martinez and Senora Valdez?

"What about Juan Valdez?" Fiala asked.

"What about him, senor?"

Like pulling teeth, Fiala thought. "Just tell me anything you know," he said impatiently.

"Valdez is nothing. A messenger boy for Escobedo."

"You're sure of that?"

"Very sure," Cruz said. "Martinez picked up the cigarettes at the border and brought them to Rios. Valdez took over from there and brought them into the city."

"Why two men for that operation?"

"Martinez would have been picked up too easily if he brought the goods into the city. So Escobedo used Valdez because he was clean."

A logical explanation, which revealed less than it proved. How had Valdez become involved with one like Escobedo? And why had his wife been murdered? Fiala took off his sun-glasses. He thanked Cruz. The informer gave him a wan smile and walked away.

It was time to check on Valdez. Fiala smoked another cigarette, then walked leisurely to the de los Reyes, an ancient hotel, but pleasant and comfortable. The manager, an old friend, was behind the desk. Fiala questioned him about

Valdez, and the manager had no complaints. Valdez was the best of workers, no trouble at all, but of late he'd appeared worried. He had been given the day off. His wife . . .

That was all. Fiala left. As he stepped from the hotel, he walked into Captain Meza.

"Checking on Valdez," the captain said, displaying his teeth in an unpleasant grin. "Did you pick up anything?"

"Nothing at all."

"And you won't. Better not waste your time on the fellow."

Fiala shrugged off the remark and Meza, giving him another toothy grin, went on his way.

It was the next day before Fiala was able to return to the de los Reyes and question Valdez. The bellhop was reluctant to talk. He'd already been questioned by Captain Meza and claimed he knew nothing.

"You may know more than you think you know," Fiala informed him.

"My wife's dead, and nothing can bring her back," Valdez snapped.

"Nevertheless, I think we'll have to talk about it."

Valdez nodded, obviously appeared frightened, but what did he know? "When your wife was missing, where were you?" Fiala asked.

"Working here."

"You came home, she wasn't there and didn't appear. Why didn't you report her missing?"

Valdez let out his breath. "As I already explained to Captain Meza, we had an argument and my wife left the house. I thought she went to her mother's. She did that before, so I wasn't worried about her."

"And the argument, what was that about?"

"Money."

"Not unusual with young people. You don't make too much on the job?"

"I depend on tips, and sometimes they don't come as they should."

Fiala nodded sympathetically. "A nice wristwatch you're wearing," he noted.

"Yes, I hit the lottery last month."

"You must have hit it big. Well, someone has to be lucky. No?"

Valdez nodded, flushing, and Fiala left him standing there and went for black coffee in the Blue Moon. He drank two cups while he weighed the issues. The bellhop was frightened, and he'd lied about the wristwatch. Money made "running" for Escobedo had paid for that. And the argument with his wife, that too was a lie. But to cover what? Valdez was a jittery fellow. He'd have to work on him more.

RETURNING to the hotel, Victor Fiala sat in the lobby and Valdez noticed him at once, then avoided his gaze, but the detective's presence was disturbing and finally he approached him. "You want to see he, senior?" he asked.

"No, I'm watching for a tourist who may check in. He's wanted in the States," Fiala explained. It was a lie, of course, a tidbit of bait. Valdez swallowed it, smiled in relief and started back toward the desk when Fiala pulled the hook.

"One moment, senior," he said. "Do you happen to know Juan Escobedo?"

The question took Valdez by surprise, but he shook his head. "No, no, I don't know any Escobedo."

"That's all. Thanks." Fiala left the hotel and returned to headquarters to confer with Lopez. The Chief wasn't in his office, but Meza was at his desk.

"Lopez is having coffee with the Mayor in the Blue Moon," he informed Fiala. "I wouldn't disturb him unless it's important."

"I'm afraid it's not important, Captain."

"I see. Nothing on the murders yet?"

"Nothing."

"But, of course," Meza said.

"You're following the wrong lead."

"The story of my life. If I had a peso for every wrong one I've followed . . ."

"I know. You'd retire, which wouldn't be a bad idea. After all, Victor, you're getting old."

"I admit it." Fiala shook his head. "I can't work the way I used to. I can't even think straight any more."

"And you're wasting your time trying to link the Valdez-Martinez murders."

"Perhaps I am. Have you any suggestions?"

Meza splayed his hands and shrugged. "None, but the one I already mentioned. Look for another lead."

"Perhaps I will," Fiala said, and left.

He returned to his favorite bench in the plaza under the sour orange tree and waited. Finally Lopez and the Mayor came out of the Blue Moon and separated. The Mayor walked away, and Lopez crossed the gutter to the bench.

"That's all you've got to do, Victor?" he snapped. "Two unsolved murders and you sit here."

"I was waiting for you," Fiala told him. "If you don't want to listen, that's up to you."

"You mean . . ."

Fiala held up a hand. "One moment. Nothing's happened

yet, but I've learned that Valdez works for Escobedo."

The mention of Escobedo brought a frown to Lopez's face. "So?" he said.

"So Valdez isn't clean. That's number one. Number two: Martinez also worked for Escobedo, which proves nothing, but suggests a lot. For instance, that Senora Valdez and Martinez probably knew each other, and that Senor Valdez isn't the good citizen he appears to be."

Lopez shrugged. "So where do these tid-bits lead us, Victor?"

"To the murderer."

"And that is Valdez, I suppose?"

"The jealous husband who kills, is much too simple. Besides, Valdez isn't a killer. He's a mouse. He couldn't have handled Martinez."

"He could have with a gun," Lopez said.

"True, but if he put a gun on him, he couldn't have tied him up. Someone else had to do it. That person also tied up Senora Valdez. Yes, at least two men were involved."

"An assumption, Victor."

"Not if you consider that both victims were carried from a car. I admit that one man could have lifted Senora Valdez, but Martinez? At least two men had to carry him to the place where he was found."

"This is confusing," Lopez

said, shaking his head. "I don't know what to think."

"Probably because you've been listening to Captain Meza."

"I have, and his theory about the murders differs from yours."

"As usual," Fiala smiled, "and, as usual, he's wrong."

"That's still to be seen. But theories and words aren't going to settle anything." With that, Lopez turned and walked away.

Fiala shrugged and lit a cigarette. He'd gotten nowhere with Lopez, but that was understandable. Two unsolved murders. Valdez is the key to the whole business. Squeeze him and perhaps he'll panic, he thought, tossing away his cigarette and getting up.

The Hotel de los Reyes stood at the far-end of the plaza. In the burning sun it was a long walk, but there was no need to hurry. Valdez would be there.

Reaching the hotel, Fiala paused and eyed the rickety screen door. Two holes had been punched in the mesh, a convenience for pesty flies. The place had gone to seed, but it was better than the fancy-modern contraptions going up in the city. At least, it was comfortable and cool enough without air-conditioning to give one pneumonia.

Fiala pushed open the door,

crossed the lobby, found a chair facing the desk and put on his dark glasses. They might help make Valdez nervous. The bellhop, standing by the desk, noticed him and looked uneasy. Watch a guilty man and he begins to sweat, Fiala thought.

For an hour he sat there, then went for coffee and returned to his chair. Thereafter, on the hour, he left and came back to watch Valdez. At five minutes of eight, Valdez stepped out, saw him and hurried off.

Fiala took off after him. Two blocks away on a dark street Valdez turned about, white in the face. "Why are you following me?" he demanded to know.

"What about Senor Escobedo?" Fiala replied. "You still don't know him?"

"You've already asked me that, and I gave you my answer."

"The wrong one. You work for Escobedo. So did Martinez. You were the last person to see him alive. You met him at Rios to pick up a load of smuggled cigarettes, no?"

Valdez stood mute, then finally shook his head and denied knowing Escobedo and Martinez.

"All right, so you don't know them," Fiala went on. "But what about your wife?"

"You think I killed her?"



"Perhaps. What happened between Martinez and your wife?"

"There was nothing between them," Valdez snapped.

"Ah, so you did know Martinez?"

Valdez glared at Fiala and finally nodded. "I knew him," he admitted. "I worked with him for Escobedo, but no blood of his is on my hands."

"Then who killed him, and who killed your wife?"

Valdez stared back, silent, too frightened to talk. Make him. Fiala leaned forward.

"We're going to headquarters for a little test," he said.

"A test? What test?"

"Don't be impatient. Come along."

Five minutes later at headquarters Fiala handed Valdez a piece of rope. "What's this for?" the bellhop asked.

"You'll tie the wrists of this policeman."

Valdez shrugged, as if he didn't comprehend, then proceeded as ordered. When he finished, Fiala examined the knots and lifted his eyes. "As I thought," he said. "Senor Valdez, I charge you with the murder of Pedro Martinez and your wife."

THE NEXT MORNING Fiala dropped into the Blue Moon for coffee. There was time enough for a second cup, a second cigarette and conversation with a man who joined him at the table. At eleven-thirty Fiala went to headquarters.

"Has the Chief arrived?" he asked Captain Meza.

Meza nodded and said, "So you cracked the double-murder. Well, I thought Valdez was the killer, you know."

"Valdez, the killer? Who told you that?"

"But last night you charged him, didn't you?"

"That was last night. I'll tell you about it later," Fiala an-

swered, grinning, and he started for Lopez' office.

"Congratulations, Victor," the Chief said when Fiala stood before him. "A cigar? Better take a handful. Good. Now tell me how you pinned Valdez down."

"Valdez?" Fiala shook his head. "You mean Escobedo."

"Escobedo? I don't understand. You've got Valdez in the lock-up."

"As an accomplice. Escobedo arranged the murders."

"Arranged them?"

"He gave the order, and one of his gun-men did the dirty work."

"You can prove that?"

"My witness is Senor Valdez."

"His word alone against Escobedo's?" Lopez snorted. "That's not enough to put the big fellow away."

"The gun-man will also testify against Escobedo," Fiala stated.

Lopez' brows arched, and Fiala explained: "I had coffee with him in the Blue Moon. He'll talk in exchange for a light sentence."

"It looks like you've covered everything, but why did Escobedo want Senora Valdez murdered?"

"Unfortunately the senora discovered what her husband was doing and threatened to

expose the whole business if he didn't pull out."

"And he wouldn't?"

"He wanted to. And like a fool he went to Escobedo and told him of his wife's threat, thinking that would get him off the hook. It didn't. Escobedo told him to get rid of his wife, but he couldn't kill her, so the gun-man stepped into the picture."

"And Martinez? Where does his murder fit in?"

"It seems that he objected to the murder of Senora Valdez, and Escobedo didn't like that, so the gun-man took care of him also."

Lopez shook his head. "Bizarre. Martinez objected, and the husband didn't."

"Not only that, but Valdez drove the car and helped carry the victims after they were dispatched."

"Sickening. How could he do that?"

"A gun at his head persuaded him."

"He should have taken the bullet himself." Lopez grunted with disgust.

Fiala shrugged. "Cowards look to their own skin first."

"Yes. Anyway, you did a job on him. How did you manage it?"

"With this," Fiala answered, drawing a piece of rope from his pocket. "I had Valdez tie up one of our men, and he fell for the trick."

"What trick?"

"Well, he knew what I had in mind, or thought he did. Anyway, he applied a different knot than that used in the murders, but I expected that and bluffed. I told him it was the same knot used on the victims and he cracked wide open."

Lopez nodded and smiled. "And what if the bluff hadn't worked?" he asked.

"It worked," Fiala answered, turning to the door. "Many thanks for the cigars."

Down below, Captain Meza sat at his desk. Fiala paused there, dropped the piece of rope on the blotter and said, "Here's a souvenir for you, my friend. If anyone wants me, I'll be at the Blue Moon having my coffee and sweet cakes."



YOU CAN BUY "MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE" EVERYWHERE

ESCAPE!

The cop, the burglar, and the lady of loose virtue: they made a lousy team, but played a great game. A game where the burglar normally ended up dead.

by **MAX VAN DERVEER**

SOME COPS like to put fear in you. If you're smart, you'll cringe. Toughs gets lumps.

Keever was a cop. He said, "Let's take a walk, Garcia."

I kept my eyes down and shook my head.

"Just down the hall."

I'd never been down the hall with Kever. This was my first bust in his precinct. But I had a hunch what was down the hall. A small room, no air, just a single light, a table, a chair, soundproof.

And nobody else around.

Just you and Kever. No cop in his right mind hands out lumps in public.

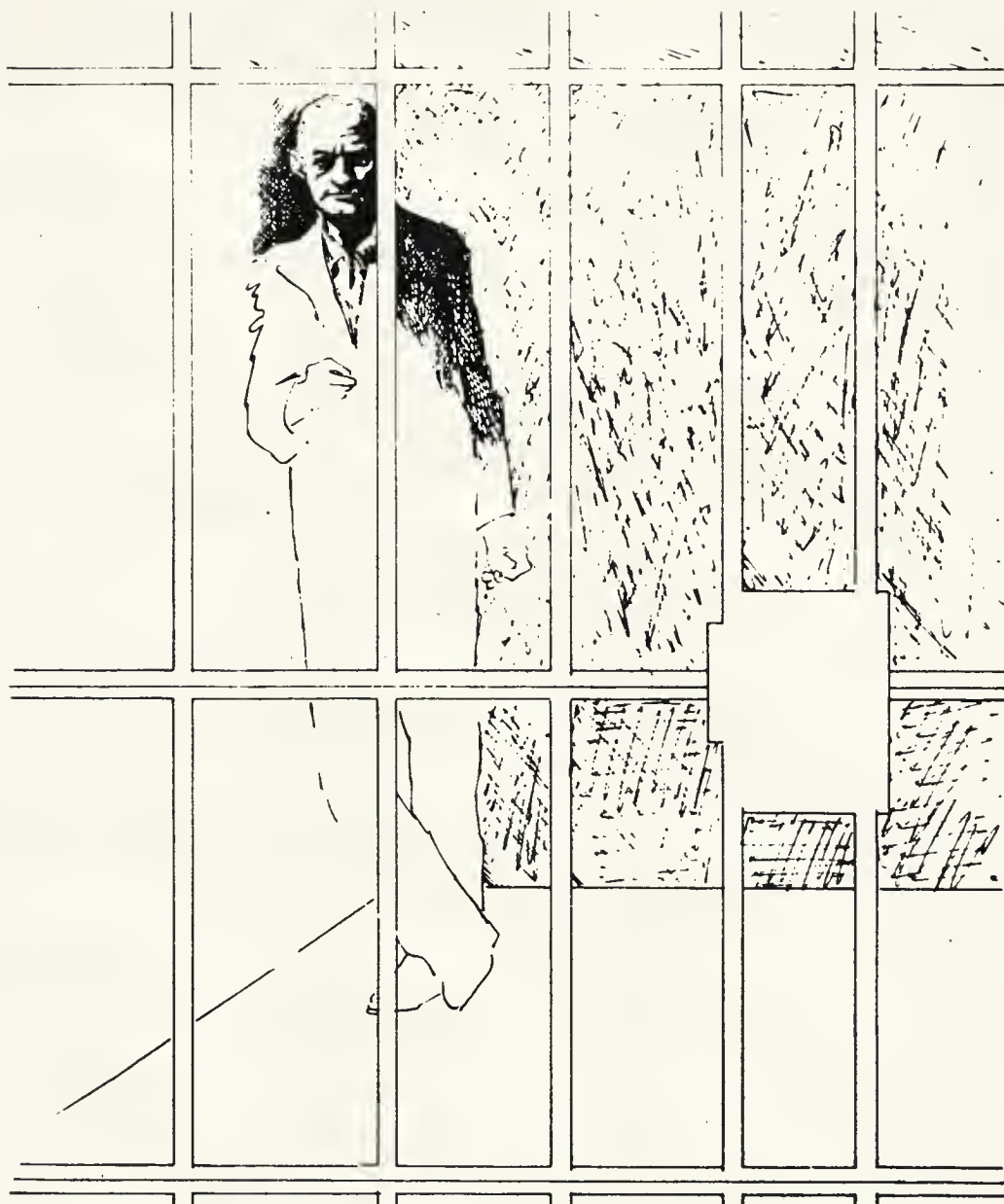
I said, "So you got me prowlin' a place. So get me a defender."

Keever gave me the fish-eyed stare some cops like to put on a

guy when they're not sure if the guy has savvy or has seen too many movies. Then he dropped his foot from the seat of the straight backed chair and walked out of the squad room, leaving me all by myself at the desk.

I felt as if I could get up and walk out of the precinct station. I looked around. There were other cops at other desks, there were other guys answering questions. But no one seemed to be paying any particular attention to me.

I eased around in the chair. The open squad room door was beyond a low railing and about twenty-five feet away. There was a corridor outside and a wide stairway at the end of the corridor, maybe thirty yards down the hall. At the bottom of



that stairway was the street door.

And outside there was a warm, black night with a threat of rain in the air. A guy

could disappear fast in the dark.

Keever returned. He looked satisfied and I figured he'd checked my pedigree with Cen-

tral Headquarters downtown. He went behind his desk and sat. He was a lumpy guy of maybe forty years. But he looked hard. And he had a rep.

Keever liked to break ribs and wrist bones. He'd been hauled up in front of his captain a few times, so the stories went, but he'd never had the rug jerked out from under him.

It was silently speculated the captain liked to hear the crack of rib bones, too, but sometimes was forced to put on a performance for the commissioner and the mayor. So Kever was hauled up—occasionally.

Keever said, "Garcia, your sheet shows eighteen suspicions and only two busts. That gives you a pretty good feeling, huh? Most of the time you've been too smart for us."

I remained meek. I said nothing.

"But you ain't gonna sit there and deny we got you cold tonight, are you?"

He'd been riding with a couple of car patrol boys in a hot spot. And they'd been sliding quietly through the black alley as I'd scrambled down the fire escape. I'd been trapped halfway down the ladder.

It had been a hairy few seconds. I wasn't sure what they were going to do to me. But they hadn't pinned me against the wall with slugs and I hadn't

snapped any foot or leg bones when they'd made me drop from the second floor level into the alley.

"Actually, you're dumb, Garcia," Kever went on. "You were workin' a hot area. We've had more prowlin' squeals out of that neighborhood in the last three weeks than from the rest of the city combined."

He paused and then said slyly, "On the other side of the coin, if all of these have been you, you've made some pretty good hauls—including the Styversent family jewels."

Trinkets. Fakes. Showpieces. That's what the bulk of the glittering hauls from apartments amount to. The real stuff is in a bank deposit box somewhere—for whatever pleasure that gives. But the Styversents weren't fakers. They wore the real stuff. And they had kept it in their apartment, where it was handy. Not many pieces, only six, but each was genuine.

Keever asked from under lifted eyebrows, "Have you got them, Garcia? No fence in town has had a smell. We know."

"I never heard of no jewels," I said.

Keever sat silent for a few moments, apparently finding that hard to digest. Then he stood. "Garcia, you're not being very cooperative here. I guess

it's all these other guys in the room, so let's go down the hall to where we can have some privacy."

"All I want is a defender," I repeated.

His anger flared. "Down the hall!" he snapped.

He started to come out from behind the desk. And then it was as if he had forgotten something. He turned and stooped, reached for a bottom drawer. He was jackknifed, his head down. I was out of his sight—and the squad room door still was only twenty-five feet away.

I bolted. I heard surprised shouts, the scraping of chairs being thrown back. I wondered how many cops were pawing for .38 Specials.

I tucked my head into my shoulders as I leaped the railing, skidded around the corner and raced to the stairway. I clattered down the stairway and shot outside to the night, the shouting still loud behind me.

I raced to the corner of the police building, careened around it and bolted across the parking lot, running low between the parked vehicles. I found the alley, turned down it, then spotted the dangling ladder of a fire escape.

I looked over my shoulder. Nothing. But I heard the shouts

coming. I went up the ladder and froze against it with the first sighting of a running cop turning into the alley.

It seemed as if most of the city's police force was passing under me, running in a variety of clusters. Some of the clusters went on out of the alley exit and disappeared. Others began to slow.

I went up the ladder to the roof, scrambled across it and jumped down to the next roof. Somebody down below would figure it soon enough. And then the rooftops would be swarming.

I went from building to building, leaping and scrambling, looking over my shoulder. I was running out of room, nearing the end of the block.

I saw the skylight. It opened—squeakingly—from the outside. I crouched, waiting for a startled shout from the well of blackness. There was no sound. I propped the skylight on its braces and remained crouched.

Below me could be an apartment, a studio, an attic. I had no idea what to expect.

I went into the well, hung by my fingertips for a moment. I sucked a breath, closed my eyes and dropped. I landed on something with lumps and a slight spring. I pitched and then lost my balance. A startled yelp fill-

ed my ears. I hit a floor, scrambled on hands and knees back toward the shadow that was coming up from the bed.

I leaped on the shadow, putting it down again and pinning it. My hand found a mouth, covered it. The head under my hand whipped in terror, legs flailed and bed coverings fluttered.

The shadow smelled good. My nostrils became filled with the scent of perfume or bubble bath. I didn't know which, but I did know I was wrestling a scantily clad girl. She was warm.

I curved a hand against her voice box, cutting off all sound and reached out and found a lamp. I turned on the light.

The girl was very well constructed. She also had become frozen in terror. I snapped, "Is this an apartment building?"

She managed to nod.

"Is there a basement?"

She nodded again.

"How many floors in the building?"

I released the pressure against her throat. She pawed and gagged. "T-three."

I left her. She wouldn't scream for all of thirty seconds. It would take her that long to get her throat muscles functioning to where she could reach full pitch.

I went down to a basement

and found a rear door. I opened it cautiously and looked up six steps to level ground. There seemed to be a small, open lot. I couldn't spot any moving shadows.

I went across the lot in a low run and crouched in a deep building shadow. There was an alley exit about a hundred feet away. Occasionally a man, a woman, a couple moved across the opening to disappear again.

Where were the cops?

I inched down to the exit and risked a look up and down the street. There was a cluster of cops off to my left, but they were concentrating on moving into a building. They were scrambling. Screams had been heard.

I slid out to the sidewalk and walked off in the opposite direction. I wanted to run, but I could not afford to bolt now.

I crossed an intersection and kept going in a straight line. I increased my pace as the confidence built. At the second intersection, I turned right and went up a desolate street. There was an alley entrance across the street. I curved over there and moved into the black shadows.

And then I ran.

THE PAD I'd rented a couple of months earlier was two rooms in a basement. Once one of the

rooms had housed a furnace, the other had been a large coal bin. The opening for the coal chute remained, although the chute was gone. A heavy iron slab covered the opening, but it was on hinges. It provided my ventilation.

Upstairs, there was a wine shop on the ground level floor and a commune of hippies occupied the second floor. Nobody bothered anybody.

I squatted in the alley behind the building and stared at it. It was quiet and black. No one seemed to be stirring. But Keever could be around somewhere, waiting in a deep shadow.

I eased over to the chute opening, put a couple of fingernails in the edge of the iron door and inched it open. I sniffed. No odor of cigarette smoke.

So maybe Keever, if he was inside, was a nonsmoker.

I eased my fingernails from the crack and remained squatted. Keever's best point for vigilance, if he was waiting, was from under the basement hallway stairsteps that went up into the wine shop. He'd have command of the front and the back doors and he could see anyone who might come through the shop and down the steps.

So my best entry to the pad was through the chute opening.



The floor was clear under that opening. I kept it clean.

I slid in and dropped, bracing a palm against the iron door to eliminate the clang.

I crouched in the darkness. There was no sound. I went to the bed, pulled up the mattress and dug down into the second spring on the right side. There was two hundred dollars there.

A lighter flared. A cigarette was lit. And Keever said, "You scared that girl bananas, Garcia."

I stood frozen. He turned on a lamplight. He was in my only deep chair. He looked almost comfortable. His hat was shoved to the back of his head. There was only the cigarette caught between two fingers of his right hand. No gun in sight. No weapons.

He drew deep on the cigarette, said, "You're a little slow on the take, pal. I thought for a while I might have to lead you out to an open street and point."

"And you stayed down behind your desk so long I thought you might be having a heart attack," I smirked.

"Knock the smart stuff. You ain't out of the woods."

"What's the pitch, Keever? How come you let me run?"

He eyed me hard. The temptation, I knew, was to knock me down. But he backed off. He said, "Eighteen suspicions and only two busts, that's not too bad a battin' average."

"So?"

"So maybe you ain't so dumb, after all—although I gotta say comin' here wasn't smart on your part. It'd figure I'd have this place spotted, wouldn't it?" He paused, then added slyly, "Or maybe there's somethun here you didn't want to leave behind. Like the Styversent haul, for instance."

"All the dough I got in the

world is here," I said. "My travelin' money."

He stared. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. "I've got a friend," he said finally, "who would be satisfied with half of the Styversent jewels. Three pieces. You could wrap 'em in a box, Garcia, and mail the box to R. M. McCracken, 4510 Crescent, City."

"What for?"

His shrug was slight. "The price may seem a bit heavy, but freedom costs, right? Figure it that way if you wanna."

"I might," I conceded, "if I had the stones."

He scowled. "You keep goin' dumb on me. I don't like that."

"And I don't know nothun 'bout no jewels," I insisted.

"So what did you just dig out of the bed springs—potatoes?"

"My travelin' money." I showed him the fold of bills in my hand.

His scowl deepened. He seemed to be thinking hard. "How much?"

"Two hundred."

"That ain't much."

"It's all I got."

"No jewels?"

"No."

"If I ever find out you're lyin' to me, Garcia, you're dead."

The way I saw it, I could be dead in the next thirty seconds. I didn't have what he wanted. And it was no trick to shoot

down an escaped prowler who was resisting arrest, no trick to find some kind of weapon and jam it in the prowler's hand after the shooting.

I felt as if I was walking a very thin thread between life and death as Keever sat there staring up at me, and I held out the fold of bills, turning meek again. "It's all I got. Honest."

He eyed the bills. Then he snubbed out his cigarette and stood. He ignored my extended hand. He went to my door, stopped, looked back.

"You can put the two hundred in the mail, Garcia, if you think that's the right thing to do. My friend ain't gonna turn handsprings over it, but it could buy you a little time, I guess."

"I can leave town?" I asked.

"You can try if you're not scared of endin' up in a box," he nodded.

"Buy if I pay—"

"My friend's gonna wanna think 'bout you. Like I said, he's gonna be disappointed, not findin' jewels in his mailbox. He had big ideas for you, Garcia. I mean, he figured a guy who collects suspicions but damn few busts . . .

"Well, he figured that kind of guy has a little savvy, might be interested in a soft touch or two, you know, on a partnership basis, sorta, where two

guys could profit . . . but now I dunno. You're gonna seem like awful small spuds to my friend, I think."

Keever left. I went to the chair he had vacated and sat on the edge. I felt like a condemned man who had been granted last second reprieve. I also felt frustrated. I'd wanted Keever to take the two hundred.

Or had I?

I got up and paced. Keever's R. M. McCracken had surprised me. But the McCracken angle confirmed something else too. It'd take time to set up an R. M. McCracken at a legitimate address. And 4510 Crescent had to be legitimate or the mail gimmick wouldn't produce. McCracken could be Keever, probably was—or McCracken could be McCracken, a partner.

Either way, Keever wasn't setting up his first take. So who had been his prowlers before me? And where were they now? How many of them had been labled "victim of gangland slaying?"

And how many "touches" had they lasted? One? Two?

I felt as if I was breathing on borrowed time. I got the small Saturday Night Special from the false bottomed suitcase and put it under the pillow on the sagging bed. The next morning it was in my trouser pocket as I

walked to a Post Office substation and mailed an envelope.

I was especially alert to all sounds, all movements after I left the substation. But no sniper cut me down in the first ten blocks of walking, and I began to breath easier. My borrowed time was taking on some stature.

The house at 4510 Crescent was a pale green bungalow. It sat nestled among other bungalows on the quiet street in the quiet neighborhood. There were young trees, grass and other green things growing all over the area. Middle class lived on Crescent. Lawn mowers, tricycles, and sprinklers dotted the front yards.

R. M. McCracken was a surprise again.

Her christian name was Rhonda. She was about thirty, rather tall, dark-haired, pleasantly attractive, and lived alone in the bungalow. She drove a 1971 blue Volkswagen sedan. But no one really knew her.

She was some kind of saleslady. She traveled. She was at the bungalow only on weekends, normally arriving after dark on Friday evenings and leaving on Sunday evenings.

No one had ever seen a visitor arrive or leave the bungalow. A high school boy kept

the bungalow yard shaped for her. He was paid weekly in cash by mail.

None of this was particularly difficult for me to learn.

KEEVER CAME to my place in the early hours of Thursday morning. He let himself inside. The sound awoke me. I jerked into a sitting position in the bed and yanked the small gun from under the pillow.

Keever told me to take it easy, and then he closed the door and stood in the dark. I kept the gun gripped tightly in my hand under the bed sheet. Keever was a dark bulk against the door. He didn't move.

"There's an old guy named Albert Wineschlager," he said. "Lives alone in a ground floor back room at 6807 Morgan. I think you'll find his place interesting, Garcia."

I felt tremendous relief. I'd gained reprieve again. But I said, "Yeah?" making it sound as if I was tremendously suspicious. Which was not difficult.

"Look," Keever said from the heavy shadow around the door, "do you want this guy, or don'tcha? You ain't in the best position in the goddam world, yuh know. Like I figured, my friend wasn't very goddamn happy 'bout a lousy two hundred clams. But he does like your sheet. Only two busts

outta twenty pickups, he figures yuh gotta have *some* talent. Now, if you ain't—"

"Okay, okay," I said quickly.

"Okay, what?"

"I'm in."

"It keeps you livin', Garcia—and it's gonna get you more than two hundred clams."

I ignored the sarcasm and asked, "My choice on hitting this guy?"

"No choice. You sit out today, you hit tonight. Eleven or after. The old man watches television til 'round ten-thirty, seldom later. When his lights go out, you hit him."

"Hold it. I don't hit places where people are at home."

"This time you're gonna, Garcia, 'cause Wineschlager seldom goes out—and never at night."

"But—"

"As long as yuh don't kill the old devil, I don't care how yuh get to him. Sap him, take along a pipe, I don't care. But *don't* kill him. Just clean out his place." Keever paused, and then added, "And remember, I'll read the squeal at the precinct station. So I'll know how much you find. You mail half."

"To R. M. McCracken . . ." It was my turn for sarcasm.

Keever snarled, "Half!" And then he departed as quickly as he had arrived.

His interest in Albert Wines-



chlager puzzled me when I discovered that the old geezer was a laugh along Morgan Street.

Wineschlager was a pensioner and a recluse. He was supposed to be senile, his mind sharp at times and as foggy as a London night at other times. But I figured Keever had his reasons. He wouldn't send me here for nothing. A test? Maybe.

Wineschlager's single window faced a small back lot. A rusty heap, the front wheels gone, was nosed into the building just to the right of the window. I sat squatted at the rear of the heap.

The window was open about eight inches. Around ten forty-five the old man shoved hands through the thin curtains and pushed the window up another couple of inches. The brief glimpse was enough. The lamp, probably on a table, was centered on the window and the bed was across the room.

I waited an hour after the lamplight went out. Then I inched up on the fender of the rusty heap, put a foot over on the window sill, reached down and caught the bottom edge of the window.

Sucking a deep breath, I heaved the window up and swung both feet inside, sending the lamp crashing.

I propelled my body into the room, hit the floor and pitched forward in a flat racing dive, landing on the old man in the bed. He managed one startled yelp before I jammed the muzzle of the Saturday Night Special against his ear. "No noise!" I hissed.

I took him from the bed and put him in a chair in a corner. Then I turned on two lamps. He was a wrinkled old duffer, probably seventy or better. He was frightened, but he looked stuffed with ancient courage, too.

So I told him, "I don't wanna kill you, pop, I don't wanna hurtcha, so you just sit quiet,

huh? Don't make me do something I don't wanna do."

He wanted to come after me. But age had put creaks in his muscles and provided wisdom. He sat rigid in the chair and his eyes never seemed to leave me as I prowled, but he didn't attempt to move.

Ransacking, I found money stuffed down behind cushions of an ancient chair and sagging couch, poked into the toes of old shoes, inside the ripped lining of a baggy overcoat. A shoe box in the portable closet was packed with bills.

I found a bed sheet, spread it on the floor and piled my finds. Then I knotted the sheet to form a bag and went to the window. The old man surprised me when I looked at him. He was crying.

I went out the window. The black sedan rolled silently down the alley to a stop in front of me as I bolted across the small lot. I didn't even have time to careen off.

The door on the passenger side of the sedan opened and in the dashlight I saw Keever leaning toward me from the steering wheel. I grunted. The gun was in my pocket but I was using both hands to hold shut the sheet bag.

I figured Keever had me cold. And dead.

He growled, "Get your tail

inside, man! We gotta get out of here!"

He was an expert at the wheel. We didn't seem to speed, yet we moved fast through the city streets. Not that we were going to draw a ticket from any car prowler boys. We were in an official police sedan, the radio under the dash periodically bleating instructions to various police units.

I eased my hand down toward my pocket until Keever snarled, "Keep 'em in sight, Garcia. It ain't that I figure you'll try anything funny, but..."

He let the words hang and I said sourly, "It's okay if I smoke, ain't it? I've had a couple of nerve-jangling hours. It was rough."

I got out a bent cigarette and a damp book of matches. The match wouldn't light. Keever flicked his lighter for me, held it near the bent cigarette. "How much you figure you got?"

"A few bills here and there."

He grunted. "An old geezer, livin' alone, cashing pension checks for years, never spending a dime, no bank accounts, it'd figure there'd be a few bills here and there, yeah." He nodded before he said sharply, "But a guy needs a sheet to haul off a few bills?"

My gun was where it was difficult to get at. His was in a

belt rig where he could whip it out.

Keever turned into a side street, drove a couple of blocks and braked in a narrow off-street area, the nose of the car pointed into a pillar helping to hold up an overhead pass of an expressway.

We opened the sheet and counted. I'd taken \$9,445 from Albert Wineschlager, probably every dime he owned.

"Wha'd yuh do to the old man?" Keever snapped.

"Left him sitting in a chair."

"Dead or alive?"

"He was cryin'."

"Big deal. Okay, five thou for me, the rest is yours—and before you open your yap, quit bitchin' 'bout a short end. You never had this big a take in your life. Yuh wanna go another round, or yuh wanna get the hell outta town?"

I suspicioned how I'd leave town. In a grave.

"I've got a hunch," I said carefully, "I could get rich—with a cop on my side."

"Just don't push. And live quiet. Stash that green stuff someplace and keep right on livin' just like you're livin' now. No breakin' out in fancy pads, or drivin' fancy heaps, or hustlin' fancy dames. You live quiet for six months or so and you can do all of your fancy livin' in another corner of the world

someday. There's a few more touches around."

"Can I ask a question?" I asked him.

"What?" Kever snarled.

"Have you lost your faith in the U. S. mail?"

"Get out," he growled. "Get outta my goddamn car."

I got out and I quickly put a concrete pillar between myself and the official sedan. But I didn't breath easy until the taillights had disappeared. Then I walked, moving along as if I had a destination. I didn't need prowl car boys busting me on a vag rap.

I WAS AT a crossroad. I had Kever cold but he had become a fascination, too. I'd checked him out. He was a bachelor, never had married, he was a cop, and he lived modestly in a small rent apartment and drove a four-year-old sedan with wrinkles in two fenders.

You couldn't call him a swinger, either. He had an occasional beer at a bowling alley, he took in a baseball game once in a while, and there were evenings when he'd go down to the river and just sit.

The single chink in this seemingly dull pattern was a dame who lived in a penthouse at the Armstrong Towers. Kever sometimes visited the dame. Her name was Tish

Grant. She was tall, about thirty, and dark-haired. If certain people out along Crescent Street saw her, they might say she was Rhonda McCracken. I wasn't sure.

The only thing I was sure of was Tish Grant—or Rhonda McCracken—was a class hooker. And she always accepted Kever's presence. No matter the hour of day or night.

Then there was the other side of Kever. He obviously was a man of talent when it came to smelling out marks. And it now was a question of how many marks over how many months, years, had lost to him.

Too, he had to have a cache somewhere.

Possibly in various bank boxes rented under assumed names, of course. But maybe not. Perhaps he and a hooker were pooling—for future use together. And they might want to move very fast someday. Overnight. It was difficult to get into bank boxes overnight.

So I was at a crossroad . . .

It was a question of how much Kever, and possibly Tish Grant/Rhonda McCracken, had stashed somewhere, against my original purpose for allowing myself to be trapped on a fire escape ladder in an area of the city where Kever might bust me.

Greed could be cancerous.

But greed also was a tremendously strong lure.

I broke into and cased the pale green bungalow at 4510 Crescent three week nights in a row. I didn't find a penny. The bungalow seemed clean, a nice little home in a nice quiet neighborhood. The furnishings were new and modern, but Rhonda McCracken/Tish Grant—take your pick—hadn't spent a fortune to make the house liveable.

I went over the bungalow again, stepping off wall lengths, checking closet depths, looking for double flooring and false ceilings, but all I found was an area of a basement wall where there might have been a water seepage problem.

Several of the cement brick blocks had been replaced, the calking cement fresh. It was enough for me.

I tingled all over.

I found a hammer and began pounding on a cement block in the wall, chipping it. Finally the hammer broke through. After that it was easy. I pounded the block into small pieces, revealing the money stashed in its interior.

I went to work on other

blocks, pounding furiously, and the money began to pile up on the floor. I became so excited at the sight—and the prospect—that I forgot all caution. I hammered viciously, opening one block after another all across the freshly calked area.

I cleaned out Keever and Tish Grant/Rhonda McCracken. I went upstairs and found two suitcases and a makeup carrier. I filled each. No bills remained on the cement floor or inside the wall.

I drove out to the airport and boarded the first flight to New York City. Then I caught a flight to Los Angeles. The next hop was to Toronto where I rested for two days. Then I rode a commercial liner to Mexico City where I finally dressed first class and boarded first class to London.

But it was in Madrid that I finally completed the transformation. I no longer was a small time hood and some time stoolie who got off by trading information.

I became a wealthy Mexican-American new on the scene at the various waterholes of the swingers.

In time, I would be accepted.

COMING NEXT: A NEW STORY BY EDWARD D. HOCH

LUCIUS LEFFING HAD ONLY TO FIND THE
MOTIVE TO KNOW WHO THE KILLER WAS, IN:

THE APPLE ORCHARD MURDER CASE

by JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

Mother Nature, Lucius Leffing knew, is a woman to be counted on, not trifled with. It was, of course, only natural for a man who hoarded every scrap of paper to find something deadly precious.



ONE SEPTEMBER evening a few years ago, my investigator friend, Lucius Leffing, telephoned to tell me that he expected a prospective client to visit him the following day, adding that he would welcome my presence, if my work schedule permitted.

After lunch the next day, I drove over to Seven Autumn Street. When I was seated in his quaint Victorian living-room, Leffing leaned back in his worn but still comfortable Morris chair.



"The case concerns the murder of an old man which occurred about a month ago in the town of Cresswood, Connecticut," he informed me. "I know little more than that. I have not yet agreed to accept the case. My caller is the murdered man's sister, a Mrs. Lorna Kelvin."

A few minutes later the door chimes sounded. Leffing introduced me to a middle-aged woman, grey-haired and somewhat too thin for her height,

but fashionably-dressed and by no means unattractive. She was friendly but reserved in manner. She looked depressed and rather tired.

Leffing's manner, courtly and considerate, appeared to lessen the tension which possessed her; she seemed to relax a little as she sat down and removed her gloves.

"Violent crime is so commonplace these days," she began, "I don't know if your local paper even mentioned the murder of

my brother in Cresswood. He was an elderly eccentric, a sort of hermit I suppose you'd say, and I presume his murder wasn't considered important enough for headlines." She looked at him almost defiantly.

Leffing frowned as he racked his memory. "I do not recall the crime, Mrs. Kelvin. If the local paper carried an account, it seems unlikely that I would have missed it."

Mrs. Kelvin nodded. A look of bitterness shadowed her face. "He was just an old man, living alone in a one-room cabin." She bit her lip but quickly regained her composure.

"Since I know nothing concerning the case," Leffing told her, "suppose you give me whatever details you possess. How and where was your brother murdered?"

"My brother, Franklin Selk, was strangled in an apple orchard on the outskirts of Cresswood. Apparently he had gone to the orchard to gather apples. He had been seen, carrying a sack of some kind, walking in that direction. The murder was brutal and entirely senseless. My brother had no money left—in fact, the town people can't recall that he even carried a wallet. He lived in a—well, a shack, I guess you'd call it—and just managed to exist by doing a few chores and

odd jobs for the people around there."

She sighed and shook her head. "For years we—my brothers and I—tried to help him, but it was useless. Where money was concerned, he was like a child. He just lost it or wasted it and never seemed able to give a coherent account of what had happened to it. He went through his inheritance in a year or two."

"Did your brother receive a substantial inheritance?" Leffing asked.

"My father was quite wealthy. After my mother had been provided for, all four children received fifty thousand dollars upon reaching the age of twenty-one. Franklin was the eldest and he ran through his money in no time at all, as I have just said. He got involved in all sorts of harebrained, speculative schemes. For years my two brothers and I tried to get him back on his feet financially, but it was useless. At length, as our own resources declined and our responsibilities increased, we gave up. We were merely tossing our money to the winds."

Leffing was silent for some time. "A familiar and unfortunate state of affairs," he commented at length, "but it certainly gives us no motive for murder!"

"That is what baffles us, Mr. Leffing. In spite of his meager mode of existence, Franklin was always amiable and friendly. Always likable. It doesn't seem possible that he could have made any enemies. The people in Cresswood may have, well, made fun of him at times, but they were fond of him just the same. They were shocked at the manner of his death and really quite angry—but of course that is of no help to us."

"Did the local authorities uncover any clues or any evidence which might suggest a motive?"

An expression of exasperation overspread Mrs. Kelvin's face. "The coroner's inquest decided that my brother had 'come to his death my manual strangulation at the hands of a party or parties unknown'—or some such routine jargon. I can't recall it word for word. But in my opinion the police investigation was perfunctory. They poked around the orchard a few times, looked into my brother's shack, asked us a few rather silly questions—and then dropped the whole matter. At least it would appear so.

"I believe their favorite theory is that a stranger, a hitchhiker probably, got into an argument with my brother and strangled him. They said the killer might have been 'high' on

drugs. But we aren't satisfied, Mr. Leffing, and that's why I've come to you."

At this point our visitor took a handkerchief from her bag and dabbed at her eyes. "In spite of my brother's faults and his way of life, I loved him—we all did—and we want a thorough investigation. It was a horrible way for a poor old man to die. The thought of his murderer running around loose, enjoying life, makes me furious!"

For some minutes Leffing sat without speaking, his fingers tented together. "I will accept the case," he said finally, "but it is only fair to warn you, Mrs. Kelvin, that I may be no more successful than your local police. If a psychotic hitchhiker killed your brother, he may be hundreds or possibly thousands of miles away by now. If he was a drug addict, he may not even have any memory of the murder!"

Mrs. Kelvin got up, visibly relieved. "I am aware of your reputation, Mr. Leffing. All the family asks is that you do your best. Your fee will be paid without question whether or not you succeed in tracking down the killer."

After our visitor had left, my friend glanced at me quizzically. "Well, Brennan, what is your opinion of the case?"

"I hate to be eternally pes-

simistic, but I think you've taken on a tartar this time! The odds against a successful solution would seem to be astronomical!"

Leffing picked up an antique pearl-ware epergne and inspected it lovingly. "You may be right, but we can no more than try. In any event, no other business is pending at the moment. I'll plan to get up to Cresswood tomorrow. Will you care to come along?"

"Name the time," I told him, "and we'll drive up together."

CRESSWOOD is a typical small New England town located in the northeastern part of Connecticut. Parts of it are picturesque and of great interest to antiquarians such as Leffing and myself, but the very center of the town is marred by a hideous new shopping-center surrounded by blistering acres of blacktop parking lots.

After signing in at the local hotel, The Carriage Care, we walked the few blocks to the police station and asked for Chief Warwick.

Warwick was a lean individual with a lined, leathery-looking face which remained somehow expressionless in spite of its many wrinkles. I judged him to be of retirement age, or nearly so. His close-cropped profuse grey hair stood up

straight like so many little spikes.

After shaking hands, he motioned us to chairs and sprawled back in his own, his long legs stretched out under a neat metal desk virtually bare of papers or other impedimenta.

"I know Mrs. Kelvin isn't satisfied with our investigation of old Franklin's death," he admitted, "but we've been as thorough as we know how. We just can't come up with a suspect or a motive. Everyone in town liked the old man. As far as money goes—pshaw! If Franklin had a quarter in his pocket, it burned a hole before the day was over!"

Leffing nodded sympathetically. "I must agree you appear to have precious little evidence to act upon. You don't object to a few questions however?"

Chief Warwick shook his head. "Fire away! We'd be happy to have you solve the case. It was a savage murder and we don't like the idea of some psycho wandering around here."

Leffing thanked him and resumed. "I understand the autopsy indicated manual strangulation. Were there any other injuries?"

"No other injuries. So far as we can reconstruct the crime, the old man was suddenly seized from behind and throt-

tled to death within minutes. Whoever strangled him had strong hands. Crushing pressure was applied. A little more and I think his spine would have snapped."

"And you can suggest no motive whatever?"

"I can't suggest any motive that begins to make sense. There was one odd circumstance which I'll mention, though I'm convinced it's without significance. A woman who lives about a mile from the orchard, a Mrs. Conliff, saw old Franklin trudging along the road in front of her house carrying a sack or bag of some sort. She assumed, correctly I'm sure, that he was going to gather apples in the old orchard. Yet when we found the body, the sack was missing."

The Chief leaned forward in his chair. "Can you seriously entertain the notion that anybody would kill a helpless old man for a sack of apples? Especially when there were still plenty left on the trees?"

"Murders have been committed for less, Chief, but I find it difficult indeed to believe that was the true motive in this case. Another question. Who owned the apple orchard? Whose property was it located on?"

"Town property and the town didn't give a hoot who took the



apples. Whoever got there first. The trees hadn't been pruned or sprayed in a decade or more and the apples got worse every year. Small and wormy. Most years they rotted on the ground."

"Who discovered the body

and under what circumstances?"

Chief Warwick shifted restlessly. "Old Franklin wandered about quite a bit. After he wasn't seen for a couple of days, I had Sergeant Quinn check his shack and then inquire around. Quinn questioned Mrs. Conliff, among others, and that led him to the orchard where he found the body."

"Nothing in the way of clues was found either in the orchard or in the old man's shack?"

"The orchard didn't give us so much as a single hair, footprint, button, thread—or whatever. Old Franklin's shack contains nothing but the bare essentials; a cot, table, two chairs, a few dishes and pots. In one corner we found a few books, newspapers and advertising circulars, plus a four-year-old Sears and Roebuck mail-order catalogue.

"Nothing was broken and nothing appeared to have been disturbed. If anybody ransacked the shack, they even managed to replace the dust! Dust coated everything except the cot, one chair and part of the table-top."

"There does not appear to be much to work with!"

Warwick nodded vigorously. "Exactly! We tried to explain the complete lack of clues to Franklin's family, but they wouldn't listen. They seem to

think you can solve a murder by waving some kind of magic wand!"

Leffing got up. "That day may come, Chief, but I fear it is still some distance in the future!"

Warwick smiled for the first time. He arose and shook hands with us again, wished us luck and promised to alert us at once if there were any new developments. He also loaned us a key which opened a padlock which the police had placed on the door of the murdered man's shack.

After lunch at The Carriage Care, we drove out to the apple orchard where Franklin Selk had been found strangled.

The orchard, screened by unmown meadow grass and straggling sumac bushes, was not visible from the road. After pushing through the fringe of brush, we saw before us some twenty neglected apple trees spread over about an acre of ground. Fallen apples, grubby and half rotted, littered the ground. Bunch grass, juniper bushes and a few stunted birch saplings grew here and there.

As we walked toward the trees, a grey squirrel which was busily burying an acorn or some similar treasure, scampered away, scolding us angrily.

Leffing prowled about restlessly, inspecting the ground

and peering up into the trees. I sat in the shade of one of the larger trees and leaned back against the trunk.

About a half hour passed before my friend finished his tour of the orchard. It looked to me as if he had peered at every blade of grass and every bush.

He seemed disappointed as he sat down nearby. "I suppose," he suggested, "we ought to have a look in the adjacent fields, but perhaps that can wait."

The orchard was surrounded on three sides by the scattered remnant of an old stone wall, fast sinking into the earth. Small trees and brush grew along this vanishing stone boundry, obscuring the surrounding terrain.

"That might prove quite a strenuous expedition," I commented. "I assume Chief Warwick's men have combed the nearby areas."

"Such assumptions," Leffing observed acidly, "are not always warranted by the facts!"

He did not press the matter, however, and presently we went back to the car. "Where to?" I inquired.

"Our next stop is Franklin Selk's shack. Let us hope we have better luck!"

The shack was located about two miles from the orchard on a grass-grown dirt road which

ran off the main highway. It was a small dilapidated structure, patched and plugged with tarpaper, strips of roofing tin and pieces of unpainted plywood.

We unlocked the padlock and entered. It was just as Chief Warwick had described it, scantily-furnished, dust-coated, and yet more or less orderly in appearance. A stack of books, pamphlets and newspapers was heaped in one corner.

Leffing looked at everything with his usual deliberation. I waited patiently, but when I saw that he apparently intended to inspect each item in the stack piled in the corner, I strolled outside and sat down on a stump. The air in the shack was too hot and dust-laden for comfort.

He emerged after what seemed an interminable time and padlocked the door.

"Any leads?" I asked.

"I'm beginning to see what our client, Mrs. Kelvin, had in mind when she mentioned that her unfortunate brother 'got involved in all sorts of hare-brained, speculative schemes.' He owned books on vanished pirate treasure, the Lost Dutchman gold mine, hidden uranium sources just waiting to be discovered, and so forth. There are any number of books and leaflets on treasure-

hunting projects, equipment and devices."

"Small wonder he dissipated his inheritance with that kind of adolescent approach," I commented.

"He never grew up, I presume," Leffing agreed. He turned and waved toward the forlorn shack as we walked away. "And this is what came of it."

AFTER DINNER at The Carriage Care, we went up to our rooms. "I don't want to be the proverbial wet blanket," I said presently, "but we seem to have come up with precious little that will lead us to Franklin Selk's murderer. Are we staying on after tonight?"

"I think another day would do no harm. For one thing, I want to look in on Mrs. Concliff."

"Mrs. Concliff?"

"The woman who saw Selk walking toward the orchard. You will recall that Chief Warwick mentioned her. She lives about a mile from the orchard."

I apologized for my poor memory and let it go at that. I found it hard to imagine that Mrs. Concliff could provide us with any constructive leads.

About mid-morning the next day we drove over to talk with the elderly widow who lived

alone in a tidy frame house just outside the center of town. She was startled but not displeased by our unexpected visit.

She sat down with us in her rather cramped little living-room. "I've been so nervous since that terrible thing happened! Imagine a maniac like that prowling around here! Oh, I do hope you'll find him out, Mr. Leffing!"

"We shall do our best, Mrs. Concliff! And now would you tell us exactly when and how you saw Franklin Selk walking toward the orchard the day of his tragic death?"

Mrs. Concliff brushed aside a straggling lock of grey hair and folded her hands on her apron. "It was a little before eleven o'clock in the morning. Just by chance I was sitting here sewing. I happened to look up and glance out the window. Mr. Selk was walking past. He was carrying a sort of greenish-colored bag over one shoulder. He didn't look frightened or worried or anything. Poor man! And he was going to his death!"

"Was he walking slowly, at a brisk pace, or about as he customarily walked, Mrs. Concliff?"

She hesitated. "For an old man he usually walked along at a good average pace." She paused. "I'd say, that morning, he was walking a little more slow than usual."

"You say that he was carrying this green bag over his shoulder. Which shoulder?"

"His left shoulder."

"Could you get a good clear view of the bag, Mrs. Conliff?"

"Well, not a good view, no. You see as he walked past here, heading south, his left shoulder was on the other side. I mean his right arm and shoulder faced my window here."

Leffing nodded. "I see. I believe you and the police assumed that Mr. Selk was heading for the orchard to gather apples?"

She looked puzzled. "Well, of course! He was carrying the bag and they found him in the orchard. Everyone here knows that he scrounged around the fields and orchards for whatever food he could pick up."

Leffing persisted. "Does it not strike you as somewhat odd that he should be carrying an *empty bag over his shoulder*? Do you think it possible, Mrs. Conliff, that the green bag was *not empty*?—and that was the reason he was carrying it over his shoulder and the reason he was walking more slowly than usual?"

Mrs. Conliff's hand flew to her mouth. "Mercy sakes! I never thought of that!"

She pondered a moment and shook her head in bewilderment. "But if he was going to

gather apples, Mr. Leffing, he'd go with an empty bag! Oh, I just don't know what to think now!"

Leffing arose and patted her shoulder. "Do not trouble your mind about it, Mrs. Conliff. It may mean nothing at all. We are merely trying to follow through on every possible aspect of the case! So far, the pickings have been meager."

She conducted us to the door, shaking her head. "I'm afraid I've just caused confusion, Mr. Leffing. I do so wish I could help!"

Leffing turned to thank her. "You may have helped immeasurably, Mrs. Conliff! Do not upbraid yourself for one moment!"

"I honestly can't see that the bag business will get us anywhere," I remarked as we drove off. "The old man may merely have been carrying a few sandwiches or a box of crackers and a container of tea!"

"You may be correct," Leffing replied, "but it seems unlikely that such items would weigh so much he would walk more slowly than usual."

I had to concede this point, but I could suggest nothing further.

After lunch, Leffing informed me that he intended spending a good part of the afternoon "rummaging around among the

records" in the town clerk's office.

I knew better than to question him, and since it was a clear, bright autumn day, I climbed into the car and started out on a leisurely tour of the surrounding countryside.

I arrived back around four o'clock to find my friend had already returned to our rooms. "Any luck?" I asked.

"It would not appear so. I thought that at one time a farmhouse might have stood in the apple orchard. I could find no reference to one. According to town records, the only building which ever existed there was a small schoolhouse. It burned down over fifty years ago, a few years after World War I, and was never rebuilt."

"You are going ahead with the case?"

"Tomorrow morning, if it suits you, we will drive back out to the orchard. I want another, more careful look."

I agreed readily enough, although when I recalled his previous inspection of the orchard, a further survey seemed pointless.

The next morning, after the dew had burned off, we drove back out to the scene of the murder.

Leffing, with a powerful magnifying glass in one hand, got down on his hands and

knees like the traditional sleuth of fiction, and began a systematic search of the ground. I poked about among the trees, looking for the site of the old schoolhouse which had burned down so many years before.

"I can't find a trace of it," I informed Leffing a few minutes later. "Not a single foundation stone nor even a stick of charred wood."

Leffing stood up to relieve his cramped muscles. "Hardly surprising, Brennan. The school stood on supports, with no cellar underneath. It was built almost entirely of wood. Probably the natives carried off whatever nails, metal and so on which could be put to further use. And that was over a half century ago." He bent to resume his labors.

I sat down under a tree and munched on an apple which hadn't yet started to rot. It was somewhat sour but not unpleasant tasting.

Although I didn't time him, I believe Leffing spent at least an hour crawling about the orchard, magnifying glass in hand.

At length he appeared satisfied. He put away his glass and began humming an old-time English music-hall ballad whose title forever eludes me.

I knew this was a sign that

he was "onto something", or at least believed that he was, but he volunteered no information and I stubbornly refused to question him.

AFTER WE ARRIVED back at The Carriage Care, he told me that he expected to spend a good part of the afternoon making various telephone calls.

Since the weather remained fine, I put on a pair of old shoes and started out on a rambling hike. It was a pleasant interlude; the air cool, the rolling hills edged with ochre and scarlet.

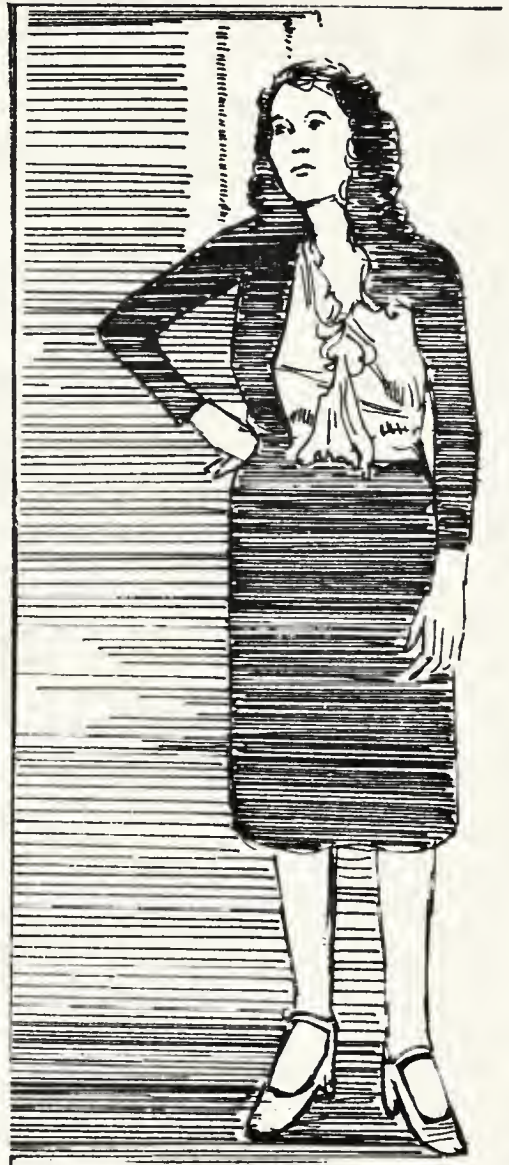
When I arrived back at The Carriage Care, late in the afternoon, Leffing was packing his bag.

"You have quit the case?" I asked.

"We can return to New Haven tomorrow, Brennan. I have turned all the facts over to Chief Warwick. I believe an arrest is imminent."

I stared at him in amazement. "You have *solved* the old man's murder then? I had no idea there was a suspect anywhere in sight!"

He smiled. "Had you observed my inspection of the orchard more carefully this morning, instead of prowling about among the trees, you yourself might have set your sights on the solution!"



I sprawled in a chair with a sigh of resignation. "Enlighten me, please! I watched you crawling around but I saw nothing except rotting apples and tufts of bunch grass."

Giving his bag a final tug,

Leffing sat down. "You know my methods, Brennan. You have the basic facts. Come, come, you must have some inkling, at least, of the solution!"

I shook my head. "I don't have even the inkling of an inkling! Stop tormenting me, Leffing! What did you discover in the orchard?"

"I discovered what I should have noticed the first time we visited the orchard. That frisky squirrel, whose acorn burying we interrupted, put me off the scent!"

"What in blazes has the squirrel to do with anything?"

"The first time we looked about the orchard, I observed that in a few spots the turf appeared to have been torn up and then patted back into place. When I saw the squirrel secreting his acorn, or whatever it was, I concluded that all the little areas of disturbed turf could be blamed on the squirrel or his cohorts. This was foolish. I did not finally understand the significance of these broken patches until I had inspected the old man's shack, talked with Mrs. Conliff—and made a second careful tour of the orchard."

I groaned. "I still don't see a glimmer of light."

"You will recall, Brennan, that I mentioned the treasure-hunting books and leaflets

which I found in the shack books about buried pirate jewels, gold mines and so on, and pamphlets describing equipment and devices which might be used in a search for such things?"

"Yes, I remember that." I told him.

"Among the various pamphlets I noticed a recent sales catalogue issued by a company which specializes in mineral and metal detecting devices. Some of these devices are relatively light and portable, easily carried by one person.

"The discovery of this sales catalogue meant little to me until our talk with Mrs. Conliff. Her remarks convinced me that the murdered man was carrying something in his sack when he walked past her house toward the orchard.

"I was still uncertain that these circumstances held any meaning until our second trip to the apple orchard. I then observed what I should have seen the first time; that a good number of the broken turf patches were definitely *not* caused by a busy squirrel's paws! In places the turf had been cut through in a straight line, and then carefully replaced. I submit that no squirrel could accomplish that!"

"You are saying, then, that old Selk had gone over the or-

chard with a mineral-detecting device?"

Leffing shook his head. "Not mineral, Brennan, metal! There are no worthwhile mineral deposits in this area."

I frowned. "But what could he find? You said yourself that the only building which ever existed in the apple orchard was a schoolhouse which burned down half a century ago."

"The long handle, on the newer models at least, disassembles into two or three sections. The disassembled handle, transmitter-receiver disc and battery box, could easily fit into an average-sized sack."

"Do you think Amery trailed Selk to the orchard deliberately with the intention of seizing whatever the old man found?"

"Possibly—but I doubt it. No one in Cresswood, including Chief Warwick, seemed aware that Selk possessed a detector. Apparently the old man always carried it in a sack and used it only in out-of-the-way places which were not easily visible from the road."

Leffing paused and resumed. "I think your Amery was just rambling around the orchard, probably filling his pockets with a few of the better apples, when Selk appeared with his detector. Unquestionably the detector fascinated Amery. He

was probably quite friendly with the old gentleman—until Selk refused to hand over the nickel!"

Shortly after our return to New Haven, we learned that Leffing's conjectures were entirely correct. After sulking for a few hours, young Amery finally confessed that he had strangled Selk when the old man stubbornly declined to sell him the nickel for five dollars. After taking the rare coin, he had disassembled the detector, stuffed it in the sack and pitched it down a deep gully about a mile away. Subsequently he had returned to Cresswood unobserved via various back roads and fields.

Following his confession, he led a searching party to the gully where he had tossed the sack. After some difficulty, the green canvas bag was located. Inside police found the disassembled detector along with an old chisel which Selk had apparently used for turf cutting and digging.

A few evenings after the confession, I lounged in an antique chair in Leffing's gas-lit Victorian living-room at Seven Autumn Street while my friend stood at the sideboard, pouring two glasses of choice *Folle Blanche* cognac, cask-mellowed for thirty years.

"It's certainly ironical," I

commented, "that after a lifetime of foolishness and failure, poor old Selk should have been strangled to death when he at last—literally—held a fortune in his hands!"

Leffing turned. "I have found, Brennan, that irony is one of the few consistent elements in many sad lives!"

I accepted a brandy with a shake of my head. "I don't deserve this, you know—your best brandy. I advised you not to take the case and I'm afraid I discouraged you all the way!"

"On the contrary, Brennan! Your presence proved invaluable! And don't concern yourself about my cognac supply. I have no doubt Mrs. Kelvin's check will replenish my stock many times over!"

"Exactly right. I had hoped for a farmhouse, but I had to settle for a schoolhouse! However, I persisted. I reasoned that children running about near a schoolhouse over fifty years ago could have dropped coins which, though of little worth then, might have become quite valuable over the years. Apparently the same idea struck old Selk. At various times he must have talked to elderly residents of the town who mentioned the old schoolhouse."

"How did you proceed from that point?"

"I telephoned the company which issued the sales catalogue and learned that Selk had indeed ordered a metal-detector from them only a few months ago. He was paying for it by the installment plan, incidentally, and was already in arrears on his payments.

"I then began telephoning coin dealers in nearby towns. After several unsuccessful tries, I spoke to a dealer in Manchester who told me that a young man from Cresswood, Charles Amery—a strapping six-footer—had walked into his shop with a coin which, as he expressed it, 'made his head spin'!

"What on earth was it?"

"A 1913 Liberty-head nickel!"

Leffing smiled at the blank look which spread over my face on hearing this.

"Until this latest find, Brennan, only five 1913 Liberty-head nickels were known to exist. There were all minted by mistake. They are, obviously, incredibly rare."

"What are they worth?"

"One of them sold in 1972 for \$100,000!"

"Surely you are pulling my leg, Leffing!"

"Absolutely not. The dealer in Manchester was stunned. Of course he didn't have funds on hand to purchase the coin. Also, in view of the coin's scarcity, he

was immediately suspicious that it might have been stolen. Young Amery, an avid coin collector by the way, told him that he had found the nickel underneath a rotting board which he was replacing in his father's barn.

"The dealer gave him a signed receipt for the coin, a down payment of one thousand dollars, and locked the coin in his safe. Amery, who was well aware of the value of the coin, insisted on eighty percent of the sum which the coin will bring in at a future auction or private sale, whichever takes place."

"You believe that Selk found

the coin in the orchard and that young Amery killed him to get it?"

"Exactly. Selk himself may not have realized the value of his find, but Amery's excitement must have made him suspicious. Probably Amery tried to buy it from him for a nominal sum. When this failed, he strangled the old man, took the coin, and probably carried the metal-detector in the sack to some secluded ravine or gully and hit it from sight."

"How could a long-handled metal-detector be carried in a sack? This has been troubling me since you first mentioned it."



Watch for These Exciting New Stories:

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McIVER'S FANCY by CARL JACOBI



GOING HOME

by

M.R. GRANBECK

*Paul Hanes didn't really listen to the old man
who gave him a ride. He really should have . . .*

THE ROAD was a gray mist where the beam of the headlights sliced through the down-pour. Ivan Merthau hunched over the wheel, his shoulders tense. His gray hair fell across his forehead, pointing to the drawn and tired face.

The silence of the car was heavy and dead. The rain on the roof was a dim echo from a world beyond as the windshield wipers ticked off the minutes.

When the headlights splashed over the figure at the side

of the road, Ivan thought it was a trick of his imagination. But as the car came abreast and passed, he saw the man with his thumb up. Without second thought, he tapped the brake pedal to slow and stop the car on the slippery asphalt.

The huddled figure ran to catch up. The door opened with a burst of cold, damp air. He was young, with long hair and sideburns. His heavy black eyebrows were drawn together in a tight frown. He held his

coat collar high around his neck.

As he climbed in the car, he wiped his hand across the dark hair that dripped water down his face. He slammed the door quickly as though afraid Ivan might change his mind. Without turning he said, "Thanks, Mister."

"Terrible night to be alone," Ivan said.

"I've been standing in the rain for an hour. You're the first car to come by." The boy tried to mop his face and hands on the soggy coat, and he couldn't control the shiver that shook him.

"This road isn't traveled much, especially at night," Ivan agreed. He turned his attention to his driving. After several minutes he asked, "Where are you going?"

There was a pause before the boy answered. "West. California maybe."

"How did you get on this road?"

The young man stared out the window. "I dozed off and didn't notice when my last ride turned off the main highway. When I woke up, I was in the middle of nowhere." He turned and looked at the old man. "No offense, if you live around here, Mister, but this place is really way out, you know what I mean?"

Ivan frowned at the unfamiliar phrases.

"You live near here?" the boy asked.

Ivan shook his head and a limp cord of hair fell across his eyes. He seemed not to notice. "I'm going home. I've been away a long time."

"A visit?" The boy looked at him, curious.

Ivan smiled. "No, I'm going home to stay. Funny how some people try to get away from the place they started out, but they have to go back in the end anyway."

The hitchhiker looked at him questioningly. "You mean like splitting with the home town scene but finally coming back to show 'em all?"

Those unfamiliar phrases again, but perhaps they were talking about the same thing. Ivan nodded in the dim light. "Have you ever been lonely?" he asked suddenly.

The boy laughed. "Lonely? What's that? I've been alone all my life. Ain't never had anyone care if I live or die. That's the way I like it. Nobody gets my problems, and I don't get nobody else's either. Naw, I've never been lonely."

Ivan only half listened. His voice was soft and far-away. "I used to enjoy being alone. I never realized how much until—" He let the words drift

off. "I was never lonely until after Ella came."

"Ella?"

"My wife. Yesterday was our anniversary. One year. She reminded me." He shook his head and his face tightened. "It seemed so long."

The boy shifted nervously and hunched down in the seat. His hands crammed in the pockets of his jacket and his eyes darted quick looks at the passing blackness outside.

Ivan didn't notice. He went on. "I didn't marry Ella until I was fifty-nine. Imagine being a bachelor all those years and then taking a step like that! Oh, I'd known her a long time, back in Clearmont." He glanced sideways again. "That's thirty miles south of here. That's where I'm going now." His voice rose above the monotony of the windshield wipers. "I never should have let Ella talk me into leaving."

The boy leaned his head back. "You just checked out on the rest of your family?"

"There is no one else. I've been alone most of my life, like you. Until Ella came along."

"You said you knew her a long time."

Ivan nodded. "After her first husband died, she set her cap for me. At least that's what folks in Clearmont said. Ella began stopping by my place,

cleaning up the house, fixing meals, fussing over me. Before I knew it she had me down at the courthouse and she was Mrs. Merthau." He shook his head as if it were still hard to believe.

The boy grinned in the darkness. "It didn't work, huh?"

Ivan sighed. "It seemed nice at first, you know, not having to do for myself all the time. But it wasn't long until I realized that I wasn't doing anything for myself. Nothing at all. Not even thinking."

"Ella made all the decisions, took charge of everything. After a while I knew there was no use arguing." His sigh was like a thin wind over a barren field. "A few months ago Ella decided we should leave Clearmont and move up to Springfield."

The boy shifted and looked out the window. His hands dug deep in his pockets.

"I don't like the city." Ivan's voice shook with emotion. "A man gets used to living one way. It's hard for him to change. We should have stayed in Clearmont."

"It wouldn't have been any different there," the young man said without interest.

"Maybe. But leastwise I'd be among friends, people who know me and that I can talk to. A man needs someone to talk to."

The boy shook his head. His hair had begun to dry and curl around his ears making a black frame for his face. "I don't need anyone. I like being a loner."

"Don't seem right. A young fellow like you being lonely."

"I'm not lonely!" His voice was angry and he tensed and sat up. "I told you, I like it this way. I don't need anyone. I don't want anyone. I can look out for Paul Hanes!" He stopped abruptly and looked away.

"It's okay, Paul. I understand," Ivan said. "I know what it's like being lonely."

"Stop saying that, old man! I don't want to hear it anymore!" Hanes glared at him.

THEY WERE QUIET a long time. It was Hanes who finally broke the silence. "How come you're going back to Clearmont?"

"I belong in Clearmont." A smile touched the corners of Ivan's mouth.

Paul Hanes shrugged and stared out at the road again. The rain was heavier, leaping in erratic sheets from the wheels, blotting out everything but the patch of pale yellow light in front of the car. The rivers of water on the side windows made the letters of the road signs blur and run together.

"Where are we?" Hanes asked.



"About twenty miles from Clearmont."

"I know, I know, but where? What highway is this? What town are we near?" He leaned forward and peered through the windshield.

"This is County Road 123. In a few miles we cross State Highway 40. Then it's all farms 'til we get to Clearmont."

"U.S. 40? That goes to St. Louis, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but 123 takes us right into Clearmont." Ivan's voice held a note of hope each time he mentioned his hometown.

"Look, dad, I don't want to go to Clearmont, dig?"

Ivan turned and smiled. "I understand. You have your own home, your own place to go back to."

"Uh-uh. I got nowhere!" Hanes said emphatically. "But

it's still raining, and I don't like the idea of getting back on the road. Must be close to three a.m."

"I suppose."

"I hate to do this, dad, but I want to go to St. Louis."

Ivan shook his head. "I don't understand how people can like a big city. I used to tell Ella that all the time, but she had her mind made up."

"You're not listening so good, old man. I said I'm going to St. Louis. I want the car."

Ivan's foot lifted from the gas pedal and the car slowed as he peered at the boy. "My car?"

"Now you're getting the picture."

"But you can't. I have to go to Clearmont. I have to take—"

"Shut up! I've listened to enough of your talk. I'm taking the car." Hanes pulled his hand from his pocket and Ivan saw the gun.

He spoke softly. "You can't. I have to go home."

"I said shut up! Now pull over!" He pushed the gun into Ivan's ribs.

Dazed, Ivan brought the car to a stop at the side of the road. Automatically, he put it in park before he let his hands fall to his lap. He looked at Hanes. "You're making a mistake, Paul."

"I already made one when I let my name slip. I can't leave

you around to call the cops, now can I?"

Ivan shook his head. "You don't understand. Running away doesn't help. You'll be just as lonely in St. Louis or California. Go home now, before it's too late."

"You crazy fool! You ain't even scared!"

"Scared? Why should I be? I'm on my way home. That's what I'm trying to tell you. Go back before it's too late, boy. Go back where you belong, where people understand you."

Hanes laughed and the sound was harsh in the small space of the car. "You're freaked out, man, really gone. Get out of the car."

"Paul—"

"I said get out!" Paul's voice was high and tight.

"Listen to me, please."

"I ain't listening to nobody!" he snapped.

"Can't you get it through your head, I have no home! There's a parole violation and an armed robbery rap waiting for me back there. I'm never going back to jail!" His face twisted with anger. The gun jammed at Ivan's ribs. "Get out!"

Ivan reached his hand toward the gun. The kid didn't wait for him to finish the move. His finger squeezed the trigger. The noise filled the car and exploded inside Ivan.

A barrier blocked the road. The highway patrol car, red light blinking dully through the rain, stood at the side of the pavement. Panic swept through Paul Hanes as the man in the slicker approached and motioned him to roll down the window.

Cool it, he told himself. You got nothing to worry about. The old guy said he had no family so they can't be looking for him. No one could have discovered the body in the ditch yet. Cool it. He covered the bulge of the gun in his pocket with his elbow.

"Yes, Officer?"

"Routine check, may I see your driver's license?"

"Certainly." He began to search his pockets. He frowned. "I must have left my wallet at home. I'm sorry."

The policeman looked at him.

"Isn't a citizen allowed a few days to produce his license now?" Paul wasn't as calm as he tried to make his voice.

The officer nodded and a small cascade of water ran from the brim of his hat. "If you'll just give me your name and address."

Hanes fingered the gun. "Ivan Merthau, Route One, Clearmont," he said, recalling the typed information on the license in the wallet he'd emptied.

He wasn't prepared for the

quick motion that yanked open the door. Before he could get the gun out, the patrolman grabbed his shoulder and pulled him from the car.

"Get your hands on the roof!" the man warned.

"What—"

"Keep them there!"

Paul Hanes heard a door slam and saw another figure hurry toward them from the patrol car. The policeman searched Paul quickly and found his gun.

"Okay, turn around." Both men had their guns pointed at him. "Step aside."

The second officer opened the back door of the car and shone his flashlight on a heap of blankets on the floor. He lifted one corner and directed the beam on the head and shoulders of a woman. The gray hair was matted with blood, the skull caved in and mushy looking.

Paul Hanes stopped breathing for a moment and then felt the nausea choke him.

"I don't know nothing about her!" The words rasped from his throat.

"Over to the patrol car." The officer motioned with the gun.

Hanes moved like a zombie. "I don't know nothing about her," he yelled into the rain.

At the car, one officer sat in back with Paul while the other

called headquarters. When he hung up the mike, he looked back at his partner. "I thought Merthau was an old man?"

The man next to Paul shrugged.

"I'm not Merthau," Paul Hanes said quickly. "I was lying. I swear I don't know about that body in the car!"

"Where's Ivan Merthau?" the man asked.

Paul knew then what the old man had been trying to say. The crazy old coot had killed his wife! And Paul Hanes killed the old man. Sooner or later they'd find the body in the rain-filled ditch back near the crossroad. They'd match the bullet to his gun. One murder rap was as good as another.

Sirens wailed and whined to

a stop. Hanes looked at the men sloshing toward them. He turned to the patrolman at his side. "What was the roadblock all about?" he asked.

The man looked at him. "We were looking for Merthau. He called from Springfield to the Sheriff at Clearmont. Said he'd had a fight with his wife and killed her with the fireplace poker. He said he was coming home and he was bringing her." He nodded toward the barrier. "We weren't taking any chances that he might change his mind."

The rain had soaked through Paul's coat again and he shivered. Then he started to laugh. He was going home after all.



Next Month:

A WOMAN SEVEN FEET TALL

*The murderer was there all along—the
problem was the matter of her height!*

by ROBERT W. ALEXANDER

MY FRIEND THE FROG

by
ARTHUR
MOORE

*Right or wrong, I was sure to die.
I didn't know which way to jump.
Not 'til a frog showed me a way . . .*

"DUBOIS," says Roxy Callahan, "Saturday is my birthday and I am like having a hunnerd close friends to the celebration, but there is a hitch."

"Izzat so?" I say, wondering why Roxy is telling me all this. He and I are not as close as Cleveland is to Hong Kong. He has cornered me in Katzie's Saloon and ladled out a



largesse of lager with a lavish hand.

"This is a birthday party which has been announced a month ago," he tells me. "It is a question of face."

I nod, getting the direction of his drift. Roxy has a lot of face to save. He is about as handsome as a fire hydrant, only he is not painted yellow. He is all hood and a chopper wide and there is talk that he was not born but was hatched from a hand grenade.

"So I want you to get the dance contest postponed," he says. "There is a C note in it for your trouble."

"What dance contest?" I ask, surprised.

He frowns at me like I am not the brightest barnacle on the beach. "Faceless Robert is holding this Saturday riot on the parking lot of the Club 97. You must of heard."

"Oh, that riot," I say, remembering that Gunny Smith, Faceless' number one head hood and Trigger type is always getting summer notions to route revenue into the clutches of the Big Cat, namely, Faceless ... and the Club's coffers.

Then it comes to me what he has said. "Me!? How can I do a thing like that!?"

"That is up to you, little friend," Roxy says with a smile that shows his fangs. "You can

get into the Club, so *you* can put a monkey wrench into the spilled beans. You dig?"

I nod, blanching like an albino turnip. Roxy and his hoods cannot get into the area. Roxy and Faceless are the kinds of pals who send each other valentines that tick. But I am also thinking that if Faceless hears what Roxy is ordering me to do he will coil my cable and cram me into a concrete crypt. With no escape hatch.

"When I spring for a century I expect results," Roxy says, handing me half the fee in advance, fifty pieces of silver, which will guarantee my extinction. He gets up and walks out.

I get up and stumble as far as the sidewalk, gasping for air. I am in Faceless' good graces at the moment—which Roxy has heard about and is taking advantage of. But good graces or not, Faceless would mash me in a minute. I am in big trouble.

So I totter toward the Club 97, slow as a turtle to a tryst. It is Friday and I have one day to work this miracle.

I remember then about Gloria. Gloria LaMarr is what Roxy is uptight about. If Gloria does her number nobody will show up at his party.

But maybe she is not on the bill. When it comes to writhing her wishbone there is no broad

breathing who can beat her unbridled, bacchanalian bumps. When she does her number it is hard to hear the orchestra because of the heavy panting.

I palpitate all the way to the Club and when I arrive I see Roxy has lost. The dress rehearsal in the parking lot is about to begin. Guys are stringing banners which proclaim that Gloria will appear.

There is a dais and divers dangling do-dads amid spotlights and loud speakers. I am able to slip into the lot and I see at a glance that nobody is going to halt this clambake, least of all me.

With Gloria in the lineup, the dance contest is a bust. Any judge would give her the nod even if she showed up in a raincoat and hipboots. However, now that I am here, I look over the lot.

According to the talk I hear, Gunny Smith has beat the bushes for a rival band and has latched onto some longhair leapers who are large on the lists. They have a best-seller called: The Peg That Pierced My Heart Is Grandpa's Wooden Leg.

This hopeful bunch is headed by a wig-heavy hopper named Jumpy Joe, and the group is the Joe Jitsues. Their big number is a dance called the Jake.

Gloria La Marr is backed up by the regular combo from the Club 97, the Bug-Eyed Seven. They were not bug-eyed before they started watching Gloria every night.

Since the Jake is such a big hit it is in the rules that all the contestants have to learn it so they can be judged on the same gyrations. There are a dozen other contestants but the scam is that the contest will come down to Jumpy Joe and Gloria. I can hardly wait to see her rehearse.

There is a big prize, but all Faceless wants is the publicity. With Gloria's assets printed in the papers he will fill the Club with suckers all year long.

Jumpy Joe's band clangs into a number and Jumpy starts doing the Jake. Five lovely dolls from the group do it with him. It is easy to see that it is a very difficult dance unless you have double-jointed loin bones and plenty of hula blood. It would also help if the dancer did not care what people thought.

After Joe stops rehearsing, Gloria is announced as the next performer. Forty photographers come to life and jostle for positions around the stage.

Gloria comes out of the Club and wriggles toward the parking lot, with a score of hoods clearing the way for her. All

the people who are fixing the flags and belaying the bunting and bedecking the buildings race to the rostrum, along with truck drivers, electricians, guards, ticket takers and Left Foot Hamish.

I am astonished to see him and mention this.

He says, "I was on my way to the park, but I heard this here commotion so I crawled under the fence."

Then he shows me his frog. Left Foot is the kind of slob who knows when it is National Hernia Week. He is a little squeal, not as big as me, and I am a gee who could sit on a dime and let his feet dangle. I should have known he would own a frog.

He is on his way to the park to free this creature.

The frog is agog with the noise of the mob as Miss La Marr comes past. Maybe the sight of Gloria, writhing her willowy way through the wrought-up waves of worshipping workmen is too much for the small green webfoot. Maybe he thinks he is back in the swamp.

He leaps like an eagle.

Left Foot shouts, but the frog bullseyes into Gloria's cleavage. And Gloria gives a squawk—heard in Jersey—and shifts her chassis into high.

She is a beautiful chick. Her

voice is the only part of her with edges. Nature has gilded this lily but loused up her larynx. She is visual but not audio so that when she screams it is too much. Some of the overhead lights shatter and neighborhood dogs begin to howl in a very weird way.

When she screams she also wriggles and writhes, trying to get the frog out of her filmy frock. There is a murmur from the crowd when she begins to undulate. Not knowing about the frog, they think she is doing the Jake.

Forty-three chorus girls turn in their sequins and wander off to typing school. Left Foot clutches my sleeve and he is breathing very shallow. He has never seen Gloria do her number—which is banned in stag smokers around the nation. His little heart is thumping and he is trembling like a politician under oath. I try to cover his eyes because I know that the Nude Bellydancer's Union has protested that Gloria's body is harmful to depraved persons . . . and other humans.

Naturally Jumpy Joe spots this development from the stage and he turns livid under the lights.

"That ain't the Jake!" he shouts. "You're rooning my dance!"

No one listens. Gloria is busy shrieking and slapping herself in a very abandoned way and the crowd is hip to the beat. The frog dance is catching on. In another second everyone is doing it. The entire parking lot is pulsating and hopping—without music. Gloria's off-key screaming is reaching the higher octaves and the nearby air-raid warning blaster is shorted and begins to howl.

By the time the fuzz arrives the worst riot in town is revolv-

ing around the parking lot. All the Marias in town siren up and cops are cramming citizens into them and yelling for more.

The riot makes the front pages of every newspaper in the country. Gloria's slithering is smeared on every one—along with sermons on sin from the straight-laced set. Faceless is hysterical with the publicity.

Even though the cops cancel his sell-out for Saturday night.

So I split the C note with Left Foot and the frog.



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An Exciting Story

HECATOMB



by WILLIAM L. STORY

Hecatomb — a quiet word for the slaughter of hundreds of innocents. Sixty feet above the ground stood a threat to the entire city, a quiet, frantic man too insane to listen...

LIEUTENANT Horace Rudderham swore as the phone rang in the kitchen. He had just pulled down the shades to block the morning light in the bedroom, undressed, and taken an antihistamine for his hayfever.

Sitting on the edge of the bed in his undershirt and drawers, he listened to his wife go to the phone. He hoped it was one of her friends or one of the kids' but something—an instinct, a sense developed over the years—told him he wouldn't be getting any sleep this day.

Helen opened the bedroom door letting in the bright morning sunlight that filled the kitchen. "Honey, it's the station. Let me tell them you're

sick," she said looking down at him sympathetically. "It's not right that you should have to go back out after working all night. You'll be exhausted with your allergy and this heat." As she said the words, she knew they were futile.

"Maybe they don't want me to go out," he said.

"It's Mike Chavez and he says it's important. You know they'll want you to go out."

Coughing as he got up, he patted her shoulder and went to the phone.

"What've you got, Mike?" he asked. He nodded as he listened. Pulling a chair over with his foot he sat down and signaled his wife to make some



coffee. "I'll be ready," he said after a moment, as he hung up. His fatigue had disappeared and he forgot his sinuses.

Helen's back was to him as she worked at the stove putting coffee into the percolator in-

stead of just boiling water for instant. Rudderham started to tell her that he might not have time, that Chavez would be right over, but thought better of it.

The hell with it. He'd make

the time. He knew that his working the night shift bothered her anyway, but especially so when he got called right back out again.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, it's nothing . . . not much. You know," he mumbled. The quick, sketchy details Chavez had given over the phone were incredible. He couldn't tell her. He wouldn't anyway, for she worried enough as it was, but Chavez had said this was strictly on the hush.

"I'll get dressed," he said getting up.

"Should I make a cup for Mike?" she asked.

"I don't think he'll be coming in. This is kind of a rush job," he said.

"I thought you said it wasn't important."

He knew that she knew it was important enough to call a man who had gone off duty and that she was starting to get argumentative. She also knew for what sort of jobs he was usually called in special. "Well, you know, it's no big deal. It's just that we have to move on it right away."

"Will you be back early?"

"Christ, Honey, I don't know. Maybe," he said going into the bedroom.

When he came out dressed, she had two cups set up for herself and him.

"Is the coffee ready?" he asked.

"Another minute or two," she said.

Glancing at his watch, he went to the window and looked down the two stories to the street. Mike Chavez wasn't outside yet, but would be at any minute.

"Why don't you pour mine now, honey. It'll be all right. It smells good and strong."

"Do you want some toast or anything?" she asked.

"No. No thanks," he said, sitting down as she poured the coffee. He forced himself to be deliberate as he stirred in milk and sugar. He thought that after twenty-two years as a cop in a big city working uniform and plain clothes that he had good control of his feelings. It was not that he had become injured or didn't have a proper regard for his own skin. It was that he was generally able to hide whatever fear, revulsion, or disgust the acts of his fellow man produced in him. At least from Helen. But now he was agitated and he felt it must show. She must sense his nervousness.

"Can you tell me what it is?" she prodded. This wasn't like her. She had long since learned that he didn't discuss his police business with her, except the most routine.

He looked at her sharply. "It's nothing, Honey. I'll talk to you about it when I get home."

"It must be something really big, really important," she pressed.

"Now why the hell do you say that, for crying out loud?" he said, exasperated.

"Because usually you complain when they get you back out after duty. Even for special things, you usually complain at least a little bit. But you haven't complained once and I know you're tired from working a full shift." She sipped her coffee. "And your hayfever's acting up and that makes you irritable. Besides, this heat. It's enough to make anyone complain to have to even move."

"I think that's Mike outside," Rudderham said going to the window. "Yeah, that's him. I've got to go." He slid on his sport jacket knowing as he did so that he'd remove it when he got in the car and probably wouldn't put it back on again until he returned home. It was an old habit and he realized that when he wore it he most likely branded himself as a cop as surely as if he wore a uniform.

He went to her and kissed her on the top of her head. "You haven't finished your coffee," she said.

"I really don't have time,

honey." She didn't look up. "Listen," he continued, "we'll go out someplace this weekend, okay? You know, a movie and dinner someplace nice. What do you say?"

"Be careful."

He patted her shoulder. "See ya," he said gently, going to the door and down the stairs.

RUDDERHAM pulled his jacket off and dropped it on the back seat of the unmarked car as he slid in. Without a word, Mike Chavez gunned the car away from the curb and down the quiet street of two and three family homes.

They were on Whittier Avenue in the midst of the morning traffic heading toward the river before Chavez spoke. "Sorry to get you back out, Harry, but the Chief says we might need you besides the regular demo guys."

"Fill me in, will you," Rudderham said.

"Like I said on the phone, this guy's got high explosives of some sort with him and he's sitting up on one of the natural gas storage tanks by the river. He threatens to blow it up by noon."

"Jesus Christ!" said Rudderham.

"You said it."

Rudderham mopped his brow with his handkerchief and then

blew his nose. "You said high explosives of some sort. What's he got?"

"We don't know for sure. Or even if he's got anything that's real." Chavez stomped on the gas and slipped through an intersection as the light turned red. "One of the gas company workmen saw the guy this morning when he went to work. He was sitting on a platform on the tank about fifty feet up or so, I guess. He threw the workman a note to the Governor and then told him to beat it or he'd blow the whole thing up right then and there." Chavez crushed the cigarette he'd been smoking in the ashtray. "The workman read the note and that was enough for him."

Rudderham swore again. "How the hell was he able to do it? I mean, how the hell do you get up on a gas storage tank with a bomb without anyone stopping you?"

"He did it overnight, I guess. Those things aren't even guarded. Climb the fence at night when no one's there and you're in business."

"My God, if one of those tanks went up it'd be a miniature A-bomb. How much gas does one of them hold?" Rudderham asked.

"I have no idea. But that's not all. There are five other tanks there and high-tension

lines too. Can you picture the chain reaction if one tank went up? And all in a residential area, if you can call it that."

"Christ, how many people are in that area? Are they evacuating them?"

"I don't think so. That was one of the conditions of the note. At the first sign of abnormal activity, he threatened to blow it up," Chavez said.

"He's a psycho."

"Looks it."

"What else did he say in the note?" Rudderham demanded.

"I don't know. You'll be filled in when we get there. We're set up about a block from the tank. I don't know any more than what I've told you."

Harry Rudderham cursed the demolition training he had had in the Army. Officially, he hadn't done any as a cop, but the department still consulted him occasionally on bomb threats and the like even though the regular demo boys did the dirty stuff. But this was something new and potentially bigger than anything he had ever been involved in. If his estimates were correct—and he admitted to a lot of unknowns—this could be a mini-Hiroshima. Being one block from the source wouldn't mean a thing.

He looked at his watch. Nine-thirty-five. "Jesus," he

said, "we've got less than two and a half hours if that guy means what he says."

They were in the general neighborhood now and he could see the gas storage tanks by the river silhouetted against the hazy August sky. Mike Chavez was driving carefully as kids darted in and out of the parked cars, using the street for a playground.

Old and rundown, the racially mixed neighborhood was street after street, block after block, of wood-frame three and four deckers jammed in one on top of the other. Lieutenant Rudderham knew that they backed up to within one hundred yards or so of the gas tanks. He shuddered as he thought of the effects of fire and explosion, especially on a day like this when water pressure would be low. If the tanks went up, there would be no need to wait for urban renewal.

Mike Chavez pulled the car to the curb in front of an empty variety store. They were about a block from the gas tanks. Rudderham recognized two other unmarked police vehicles and was momentarily surprised at the lack of squad cars and fire apparatus. Then he realized that the presence of patrol cars and fire equipment, even if hidden from the tank itself, would arouse curiosity and



might precipitate the activity that would cause whoever it was to fulfill his threat of early detonation.

"That's just the problem, Harry," Chief of Police Carl Werner confirmed when Rudderham and Chavez were inside the vacant variety store. A command post of sorts had been hastily set up—table, with police radio on it; chairs; map of the area. Besides Chief Werner, Harry Rudderham recognized the Police Commissioner, the Fire Chief, four boys

from demo, and a man he knew was from Civil Defense but whose name he had forgotten. The Mayor of the city was in front of the map, smoking a cigarette nervously.

"If we call in black and whites, fire equipment, civil defense apparatus and so on," Werner continued, "we're running the risk of this guy setting it off early. Of course, he'll do it by noon anyway, he says. So if we want to evacuate or block off this area, we'd have to start now."

"We'd never be able to do it," said the Mayor. "Not enough time." He ran his fingers through thinning hair. "We've been in touch with the Governor, of course. He's offered State Police, even the National Guard. But what the hell good will they do now? We'll need them later, of course, if . . ."

"Mike mentioned a note to the Governor," Rudderham said.

"This is it," said the commissioner, proffering it to the lieutenant.

Rudderham read the note, hand printed in capital letters on a piece of school composition paper:

TO THE GOVERNOR,

I HAVE LIVED ALL MY LIFE IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD. IT USED TO BE A

PRETTY GOOD PLACE TO LIVE BUT NOW IT IS NO GOOD. IT IS A STINKING PLACE NOW TO LIVE IN AND NO ONE CARES ABOUT US PEOPLE STUCK HERE SO I AM GOING TO BLOW THE WHOLE THING RIGHT OFF THE MAP AT TWELVE OCLOCK TODAY, I AM WILLING TO DIE AND THE OTHER PEOPLE WHO DIE TODAY WILL DIE FOR A GOOD USE, THEY WILL MAKE EVERYONE SEE THAT PEOPLE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO LIVE IN SLUMS. I HAVE THOUGHT ABOUT THIS FOR A LONG TIME AND NOTHING CAN CHANGE MY MIND. IF ANYONE TRIES TO STOP ME OR IF I SEE MANY POLICE OR LOTS OF PEOPLE STARTING TO MOVE OUT I WILL BLOW THE TANK UP RIGHT AWAY. I HOPE THIS ACTION WILL MAKE YOU START PROGRAMS RIGHT AWAY TO GIVE PEOPLE AND THEIR KIDS GOOD DECENT PLACES TO LIVE.

MARTIN WEISS

1171 MARKET STREET

"He gave his name? Is that really the guy?" Rudderham asked, handing the note back to the Commissioner.

"We've checked him out and I guess that's who he is, all

right," said Werner. "We have his wife downtown, the poor bastard. Weiss hasn't been home all night and his wife says he's been acting strangely for months. Really brooding about his job, the neighborhood, and so on."

"What does he know about explosives?" asked Rudderham. "Job? Military?"

"Nothing in his job experience to give him knowledge of explosives. He's a factory worker. Mattress factory. We're still waiting to hear from the Army. He did serve in World War Two his wife says. But—and this is significant—according to his wife he likes to tinker around the cellar with chemicals, electrical gadgets, and so on. Now, what he'd be able to come up with, we don't know. Whether he ever got the right combination of chemicals or not is almost impossible to check out. We've been to the house and if he ever had anything in the cellar, he's cleaned it out."

"Where does that leave us?" asked Rudderham.

"Right on the spot," said the Mayor, perspiring furiously. The lieutenant wondered whether the heat alone was the cause.

"We're getting a man with binoculars into one of the houses near the tank," said

Werner. "He should be there by now. The problem was getting the family out and isolated without causing a stir. The house is about one hundred fifty yards from the tank." The Chief lit a cigarette with steady hands. "We're hoping we can get a rifle shot at him. We've got a couple of guys for that on the way."

"Why can't you evacuate all the parts of the neighborhood that he can't see? You know, right up to the line of houses that border the tank. And then get those houses emptied by the back door?"

"That's what we had in mind if it comes to it. But, as we said, it's risky and there isn't much time. It'd be awful hard to pull that off without creating a lot of stir. We'd hate to push him into doing something that he might not do otherwise. See what I mean?"

"There's no guarantee that he'll go through with it. He might be bluffing. He might back off on his own. But if we upset him by doing what he says he doesn't want us to do, that might push him over. Of course, we don't even know if what he's got would do the job. That's a chance in our favor."

"What does the Gas Company say?" asked Rudderham. "I mean, how durable are those tanks?"

"Well, it depends. The tanks—holders, they call 'em—are made of steel plate about four inches thick. It'd take a good charge to rupture it, but . . ." The Chief paused. "And don't forget there are five other tanks there plus the high-tension lines."

Chief Werner took a deep drag on his cigarette, inhaling and holding the smoke in his lungs a moment. "It comes down to this. We don't know if it'd blow or not for sure. There might just be a rupture of the tank and the gas would leak out without exploding or catching fire. That is, if we're real lucky. But if it blows . . . Jesus, there could be one hell of a chain reaction with those other tanks and the wires. I don't like to think of the results, believe me."

Lieutenant Rudderham looked at the Mayor. The man was ashen. Taking his handkerchief from his pocket, Rudderham captured two hard sneezes and blew his nose. Damn hayfever. He looked at his watch. Nine-fifty-five.

Noticing, the Mayor looked at his own watch, went to the window and looked out for a moment. Turning, he said, "We can't wait any longer. I want the area blocked off and evacuation of the houses near the tanks begun. Get the people out

the back doors and moved out in unmarked cars."

RUDDERHAM pulled a chair from under the table and sat down. Suddenly, he was completely fatigued. The inside of the store was stifling. The day gave promise of mid-ninety degree readings again, a continuation of a heat wave approaching three weeks.

The radio on the table cracked for the first time. Because of the special frequency, they weren't picking up routine calls. "This is Gill. Do you read me? Over."

Chief Werner went to the radio and spoke into the mike. "We hear you, Gill. Go ahead."

"He's partially obscured by one of the supporting girders. He's got a box with him of some sort but it's hard to make it out clearly."

"How high up is he, Gill?" asked the chief.

"Pretty high. Sixty feet anyway."

Chief Werner looked at the others and scratched his head. "I think he'd be able to observe any evacuation activity from that height, Mr. Mayor."

Swallowing hard, the Mayor sat down at the table near the radio.

"Could someone get a shot at him from where you are?" asked Werner into the mike.

There was a moment's pause before Gill's voice came back. "The range is okay. But he's pretty well obscured by the girder. He's got the box wedged between himself and the tank so that if you missed with the first shot he could send the whole thing up. There'd be no second shot."

"Would they have a better shot from another house? Another angle, you know?" asked the Chief.

There was another pause before Gill spoke. "No soap. These houses back right up to the tanks. The houses to my right would have the shot blocked by the tank itself. The houses to the left would be even more blocked by the girder."

"Look, Gill," the Chief said, "the boys with the rifles ought to be there any minute. When they get there, report right back to me. And until you do, don't let them do a goddam thing. Out."

"Roger. Out."

For a moment no one spoke and then the Commissioner said, "There's no way we can get to him from the other side, I suppose."

"Not without running the chance of him seeing them coming. We might get someone in the tank yard from the river, but they couldn't get within six hundred yards without him

spotting them if he's being at all watchful," said the Chief.

Rudderham reached for his handkerchief and honked loudly into it. It was hours before he could take another pill. The heat seemed to aggravate his symptoms. If only it would rain. "Has anyone tried talking to him?" he asked.

"We batted that around," said Werner, "and decided against it for the time being. For one thing, it'd attract a crowd if we went in there with a bull-horn. We just don't know if it'd push him the wrong way."

"Not to be argumentative, sir," said Rudderham, "but I think it's worth a try. It sounds to me like this guy is unsure of himself, despite what he says in the note."

"How do you see that, Harry?" asked Chavez.

"Well, just the fact that he bothered to warn us beforehand. And the time lapse. It's as if he's giving himself time to back down or be talked out of it."

"I don't know . . ." said the Mayor.

"The guy's just like a suicide. You know, part of him wants to, part doesn't. Part is willing to be talked out of it. I don't like to sound like a shrink, but I think he's trying to say something more than what's in the

note. I think you could communicate with him. Not with a bull-horn, but someone getting in close to the guy in a non-threatening way. You know, just talking to him."

"But who the hell is going to get in that close to him?" asked the commissioner.

"If you mean from the danger viewpoint, we're not much safer here than we would be on top of the tank, I'm afraid," replied Rudderham, blowing his nose again. "I really think someone should talk to him," he continued. "He must be hot as hell up there. He's isolated. I think we should communicate with him. Besides," he added, "maybe we could distract him that way so he wouldn't notice evacuation activity."

No one spoke. The Mayor ran his fingers through his hair and went to the window. Chief Werner lit another cigarette.

"I think it's worth a shot," prodded Rudderham. "For chrissake, we've got to try something. We can't just sit here. We've got less than two hours." He wiped his nose and considered taking another pill even though it was too early. The trouble was they made him drowsy and he was tired enough anyway.

"I'm a goddam hero. I'll go, if you want," he said putting away his handkerchief and re-

membering that a fresh one was in his jacket in the car.

The radio cracked. "This is Gill. The rifle boys are here. What do you want them to do?"

Werner picked up the mike and asked, "Has he moved? Do they have a clear shot at him?"

"Sorry Chief. He hasn't budged. The best they could do is to get him in the shoulder. That might knock him off his perch."

"Wait," said the Chief into the mike. "What do you think?" he asked looking from the Mayor to the Commissioner and back.

"Too risky," said the Mayor.

"Those rifles pack a wallop, sir. They have a lot of shocking power," argued Chief Werner. "A solid shoulder hit would probably knock him off that tank."

"Only probably, you say. And what if it's not a solid hit?"

"Those guys are good," said the Chief. "They're well in range and they'd be firing together."

The Mayor came from the window and sat down again. "I don't know."

"If I talked to him I might get him to move so they'd have a better shot," suggested Rudderham. "I don't think he'd push the button right away just because someone tried to talk to him."

Werner crushed his cigarette and lighted another right away. "I think it's worth a chance," he said, looking at the Mayor.

The Mayor studied Harry Rudderham for a moment. "You really want to?" he asked.

"I'll do it."

"Well," he said after a pause, "go ahead them. Try it."

Picking up the mike, Chief Werner said into it, "Gill, we've got a man, Harry Rudderham, who's going to the tank to talk to Weiss. He'll try to get him to move so that the rifle boys have a clear shot. Do you read me? Over."

"We hear you, Chief."

"Okay. Now get this. They are *not* to shoot until or unless they get a definite instant kill shot. Is that clear?"

"Roger, Chief," came the response. "We understand. And say 'good luck' to Harry. Out."

"Werner looked at Rudderham. "You want Mike to give you a ride?"

"Yeah. Let's go, Mike. Let's get the hell over there," said Rudderham as they stepped out to the car amidst expressions of good luck.

Outside, the slight breeze did nothing to mitigate the effects of the heat. Shimmering lines rose from the sidewalk and the tops of the parked cars.

LIEUTENANT Harry Rudderham



reached into the back seat of the sedan for his jacket and exchanged handkerchiefs before sitting down. Chavez pulled the car from the curb and headed for the tanks. As they approached the row of houses that butted the gas yard, Rudderham said, "Let me out before the car gets within his sight."

Mike Chavez pulled the car to the curb beside piled up trash. Three young boys lolling on the sidewalk of the front stoop of a four-decker watched the two men in the car languidly. Flies buzzed around a plastic trash bag that had been

ripped open by a dog, paper and cans spilling from it into the gutter.

"Harry, what can I say? Good luck, I guess, is all."

"Right," said Rudderham unstrapping his holster from his belt and sticking it in his rear pocket. He got from the car and walked to the end of the street toward the open area of the Gas Company yard. He could see the barbed-wire fence and cursed himself for not making sure that a gate was open somewhere. He didn't think he'd be able to climb the fence.

He pictured himself hung up at the top with the seat of his pants ripped out. Even as a kid, he couldn't climb fences worth a damn. But it'd be ludicrous to walk back if there was no gate open.

As he reached the last row of houses, he paused. Six gas tanks were in front of him in the huge fence-enclosed area. Running inside the enclosure, beside the tanks, were the high-tension lines. Beyond the tanks lay the river. He could faintly hear the sounds of its traffic. The sun beat down indistinctly from the hazy, yellowish sky. His legs were rubbery from fatigue and his sinuses throbbed.

Slightly to the left loomed the tank nearest the fence and row of houses. That was it. He

could see nothing on it. According to Gill, Weiss would be on the left side of it. He looked up and down the row of fence for a gate but couldn't see one. He looked at his watch. Ten-thirty-two.

Turning to his left, he began to walk down the sidewalk. A small, shorthaired dog with bulging eyes growled at him from between two barrels of trash. "Beat it, you ugly little bastard," he said to it. The dog growled again and walked behind him stiff legged. "Take a nip at me and I'll kick your goddam jaw off." He continued walking and the dog barked at him but stopped following and turned away.

Rudderham glanced up discreetly along the row of houses to see whether he could spot the one Gill and the rifle boys were in, but was unable to distinguish which one it was. He looked across at the tank. He should be able to see Weiss soon. Around the corner from the row of fence, he could see an open gate and he quickened his pace. Perspiring freely now, he wiped his brow with his handkerchief.

Rudderham glanced again at the tank and his heart quickened. He could see him. The form was huddled between the tank and a supporting girder as Gill had described. He couldn't

see the box but didn't dare scrutinize too carefully.

When he reached the end of the street, he crossed over and walked along beside the fence until he came to the gate. The tank was about one hundred fifty feet from him and he could see Weiss huddled against it. He thought that Weiss was watching him. He paused and then, keeping his eye on the figure on the tank, walked through the open gate.

Again, he cursed the fate that had made him select demolition those many years ago as a young man in the Army. He felt a sneeze coming but didn't reach for his handkerchief for fear that Weiss would regard the move as threatening. Tall weeds grew all along the fence and within the enclosure itself. Rudderham stifled the sneeze almost through sheer will but could feel his nose start to run.

He looked to his right at the row of houses he had just walked past, trying once again to spot which one Gill and the others were in. He thought he could guess which it was from the angle Gill had described but he detected nothing in the windows.

He was about sixty feet from the tank when Weiss yelled at him. "Who are you? Get out of here, do you hear me?"

"Mr Weiss?" Rudderham called, continuing to walk slowly toward the tank. "Mr. Weiss, can I talk to you?"

"You get out of here, do you hear me? I don't want to talk to anyone."

"Just for a minute, Mr. Weiss."

"Who are you? Are you from the police?" asked Weiss. He hadn't moved his position between the tank and the girder at all.

"Yes, Mr. Weiss, I'm a police officer. But I just want to talk to you, that's all," yelled Rudderham.

"I don't want you to come any closer. You stop right there, you hear me?" screamed Weiss.

Harry Rudderham took another two paces and stopped. He judged himself to be about thirty feet from the tank.

"Now I want you to turn around and walk out of here," the bomb man said.

"I just want to talk to you, Mr. Weiss. What you are planning to do makes no sense."

Weiss yelled back, "I won't talk about it. My mind's made up."

"Talking won't hurt, will it? You've probably got a lot of good reasons for wanting to do it." Harry Rudderham took a few steps forward. "You're right that people shouldn't have to

live in slums, but it's a complicated problem."

"You stop right now or I'll blow the whole thing up," shrieked Weiss, holding a box out for Rudderham to see. He held his breath as Weiss shifted his position slightly.

"Mr. Weiss," shouted Rudderham after a moment. "I think you should at least explain to someone why you're going to do this. Your note didn't give much detail, you know." Conducting the conversation at a yell strained the lieutenant's allergy-taxed respiratory system. He found himself becoming winded. "Can't I come a little closer so we don't have to shout at each other like this?"

Weiss seemed to be regarding Rudderham carefully. Finally he said, "Do you have a gun? You throw your gun down but don't you try anything."

Reaching into his back pocket, Harry Rudderham extracted his holster and service revolver. He held it for Weiss to see and then carefully put it on the ground and stepped toward the tank. "Okay, Mr. Weiss. I'm unarmed. I don't mean you any harm anyway. Like I say, I just want to know more about why you're going to do this."

He was almost at the base of the tank. Slightly to his left, a

steel ladder ran up the side of the tank. The ladder was an open tube, the rungs a series of circles going up. The tank was far larger than he had imagined one would be. It was strange how you could see something that was so common and never really have any idea of its size or appearance.

Shielding his eyes from the glare with his left hand, he looked up at Weiss. The man was sitting on the next to the top of four ledges that circumscribed the tank. He had the box, whatever it was, beside him. "Yeah, Mr. Weiss, like I said, you're right about slums being lousy, but how is what you plan to do help all those people?" Rudderham asked, waving his right arm to the row of houses.

"Didn't you read my note?" Weiss screamed. "Of course, I'm sure you did. The Governor probably won't even see it which is just the kind of thing I mean. No one takes these evil situations seriously. No one cares except the people trapped. Well, they'll take it seriously after I'm through." The man's voice was shrill and he looked trapped, desperate, like cornered men the lieutenant had seen many times. For the first time, he thought that Weiss might fulfill his threat. The man had moved somewhat but

Rudderham could tell that he still hadn't exposed himself sufficiently to the rifle fire.

If he walked any closer to the tank, he'd be under the ledge and wouldn't be able to see Weiss. Yet he had to get closer to the man. He needed eye contact.

"Look, Mr. Weiss," Rudderham said. "I've got terrible hayfever, you know. It raises hell with my sinuses, throat, the whole thing. It's awful hard for me to talk raising my voice this way." He paused and slowly extracted his handkerchief from his pocket. He blew his nose loudly into it, wiped carefully, and returned it to his pocket. "Do you think I could climb up the ladder a little way and talk to you? I'm unarmed. I can't do anything to hurt you."

"You're right. There's nothing you can do. There's nothing anyone can do to hurt someone who's willing to die for what he believes in. Are you willing to die, Mr. Policeman?"

Harry Rudderham walked toward the tank while part of him said that he should turn the other way. He longed to hear the report of a rifle and see Weiss's body hurtle from the tank. Please, just let it end like that, that simply.

When he was under the ledge so that Weiss couldn't see him, he looked at his watch. Three

minutes to eleven. He ducked under the loop of the first circle-rung and began to climb. It was about twenty feet to the first ledge. Breathing deeply, legs aching, he forced himself to climb. The ladder was in the full sunlight and the metal was painfully hot to his hands.

When he reached the first ledge, he leaned against the tank, catching his breath. He began to cough, deep racking coughs, raising a thick gob of wretched-tasting slime. He spat it over the side. He wondered whether he'd feel anything if the tank blew. Would he be conscious of the fact of explosion for a split second or would it be a transition from awareness to unawareness with nothing in between?

Rudderham looked up. He could see nothing except the bottom of the next ledge. He'd have to climb up two more ledges if he was to be able to see Weiss. He looked at his watch again. He had wasted eight minutes. Five after eleven. The first traces of panic gnawed at his stomach. The coffee he had had with Helen had turned to acid. How long ago was that?

Wetting his hands with saliva, he grabbed the metal ladder and began to climb again. He kept going past the next ledge and stopped about



five feet below the ledge Weiss was on. Weiss was just above him and slightly to his right. "Mr. Weiss, I'm going to come up, but don't worry, all I want is to talk," Rudderham said, hoping his voice sounded reassuring.

WHEN HARRY Rudderham was eye level to the ledge, Weiss said, "You stay right there." Weiss was about five feet to his right, in the same position. He

was a small man. Mid-fifties, Rudderham pegged him. He had on work clothes—baggy pants, faded blue shirt. He wore paint-speckled eyeglasses with a crack in the right lens. It made him squint.

"You're a brave man, Mr. Policeman. But you're a fool. I mean what I say. I am very determined. Very determined." Weiss looked at Rudderham, and then beyond him, eyes vacant and glassy.

Harry Rudderham adjusted himself on the ladder. The thing was burning hot and his hands hurt.

"Don't you try anything, Mr. Policeman. If you do, I'll push the switch. Here, look." He held the box for the lieutenant to see. It was a green wooden box, somewhat larger than a shoe box, with a toggle switch on top. "I have twenty-five sticks of dynamite in here, Mr. Policeman. I think that's enough, don't you?"

The question was tantalizing. What *was* in the box? Very possibly, nothing.

Henry Rudderham looked past Weiss to the row of houses, suddenly realizing that he was directly in the line of fire. Somehow, he would have to lure the man to move one way or the other while he got safely below the ledge. "Mr. Weiss," he said, "my God, it's hot here

especially with the sun beating off this tank. Why don't we at least move around the other side to the shade?"

"Yes. I'm very hot. But it won't be for much longer."

This was perverse. "I have to reach into my pocket for my handkerchief so don't think I'm reaching for anything else." Rudderham drew out the rumpled cloth and wiped his dripping nose. He then blew hard into it.

"This hayfever is a real pain in the neck, I'm telling you. I get it every spring and then it goes away for a while until mid-August right through September or even into October."

It was ludicrous standing on this ladder, holding on first with one hand then with the other because of the hot metal, talking about hayfever when at any moment he might be blown into molecules. As he talked, Harry Rudderham watched Weiss closely. The man would look at him and then look away dreamily. Occasionally, he looked at the green box in his hand, caressing it absently like a pet cat.

"I used to take shots for it when I was a kid. I had it real bad then. Now, the pills control it pretty well, but not completely, as you can see. Heh, heh."

Paying the lieutenant no at-

tention, Weiss was mumbling to himself. Rudderham wished he had his gun. He was sure he could get the man. "Ah, do you have any kids, Mr. Weiss?"

"What's that?"

"I just asked if you have any kids."

Weiss looked strangely at the lieutenant. "No. Not any more."

Suddenly, Harry Rudderham was convinced that the box really did contain explosives and that the man intended to use them. He knew he had to operate on that assumption. If it were a bluff, there was nothing to lose. If he precipitated the man into early action . . . well, that was the chance.

"You know what's sad, Mr. Weiss?" he asked, hoping fear and fatigue hadn't robbed him of good judgement. "That you, by appointing yourself as God, are going to rob a lot of people of the chance to rise above the thing you want to destroy."

He regarded the man closely. He seemed still to be paying no attention. "There are a lot of kids living in those homes. Kids who like living." Rudderham glanced down at his watch. Eleven-eighteen. "But now some righteous fanatic is going to take their lives away. History is filled with people like you who do more evil in the name of what they think is good."

He paused, swallowing hard. What the hell, he didn't have all day. "In short, Mr. Weiss," Rudderham shouted, "you're a goddam nut who's just going to hurt a lot of people and not solve anything."

Weiss turned suddenly, eyes blazing. His mouth was working and a stream of incoherent syllables gushed out. As Weiss began to slide in his direction, Rudderham waited until the man had moved about half the distance toward him and then ducked his head.

Two quick reports cracked the air, then a third, followed by a shriek of pain. Rudderham heard the box fall to the ledge. He popped his head up quickly, hoping the rifle fire had ceased.

Weiss was propped against the side of the tank, spun around by the impact of the bullet. Animal noises came from his throat as his eyes rolled wildly. His eyeglasses were gone. Blood trickled from under his right armpit. Exit wound, the lieutenant noted irrelevantly. The box was an inch or two from the side of the ledge about four feet from Rudderham.

Shrieking animal sounds, Weiss started toward it. Pulling himself up on to the ledge and with a frantic kick of his feet, Rudderham dove at Weiss. The man was fantastically strong.

With incredible strength, he dug his fingers into the lieutenant's face, tearing into the flesh with his nails. Rudderham felt himself being turned over and pinned to the ledge.

Weiss, teeth bared, face contorted in pain and rage, pushed into Rudderham's chin with the heel of his left hand while with his right he groped for the box. Rudderham clung to Weiss's right arm; from the corner of his eye he could see the fingers probing for the toggle switch. He felt his head being forced back and throat stretched by the relentless left hand and he thought he was going to gag. The sun glared down, nearly blinding him.

Suddenly, in his efforts to grab the box, Weiss swung over Rudderham, straddling him. Bringing his leg up sharply, the lieutenant drove his knee into the man's groin. With a bellow of agony, Weiss fell back, clutching his belly.

As Weiss rose to his knees and started toward the box again, Rudderham plunged forward driving his head into his stomach. Falling backward, Weiss slipped into the ladder chute, his head striking one of the rungs. Rudderham watched him fall down the chute like a bag of laundry, bumping back and forth, from side to side,

until a leg caught in a rung, and he sat still, wedged grotesquely near the bottom.

For a moment Harry Rudderham lay watching the inert form. In the distance, he heard sirens wailing their electric note. He picked himself up and sidled to the box. He checked his watch. Eleven-twenty-nine. Putting his ear to the box, he listened carefully for a back-up timing device. Nothing. It could be acid and off considerably either way. The box had to be removed from the proximity of the tank.

Lieutenant Harry Rudderham picked the box up, went to the ladder and, wedging it with his right arm against his chest, began a rapid but cautious descent. Near the bottom of the ladder, he heard the demo truck swing through the gate. When he reached Weiss's form blocking the chute, he removed the leg dangling through the rung and the man fell to the ground. Stepping over Weiss, he handed the box to the heavily padded man who had stepped from the truck.

Less than a half hour later, Chavez pulled the sedan on to the street of neat two and three family homes. Rudderham looked at his watch. Twelve-fifty. A nice cold shower then out for lunch with Helen if she

hadn't eaten. The hell with a nap. He watched the row of houses slide past the car. Not a bad neighborhood, but someday he wanted to live on the first floor. He was tired of climbing stairs.

Mike Chavez pulled the car to the curb and stopped. "Quite a day," he said.

"Yeah."

"You'll get a commendation for sure."

Rudderham shrugged.

"Twenty-five sticks, huh? Where the hell did he get them?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think they would have blown the tank?"

"Yes."

"Jesus Christ!" said Chavez.

The two men just sat for a moment, neither speaking. Finally Rudderham said, "Well, buddy, I'm going in." He yawned and then took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. "Werner gave me tomorrow off. Good deal, huh?"

Picking his sport coat off the rear seat, he slid out the door. He looked in the window and grinned. "Hey, the next time you call me in the morning make it for checking out a firecracker complaint, huh?"

He walked from the car to his home, wondering how he'd explain the scratches on his face to Helen.

THE CLARION CALL

by JOHN LUTZ

*The ferris wheel, calliope, the barrel ride,
played their sweet and clarion tunes, nos-
talgic accompaniments to a child's death . . .*

GRAYVILLE was isolated off minor blacktop highways that wove through thickly wooded hills. Not the usual place for a tourist to find himself, but then Mason was more than the usual tourist. Even on his two week summer vacation he was still the devout journalist of the off-beat, roaming in search of the remote and long neglected human interest story.

There was one in Grayville, his reporter's inner voices told him as he drove his station wagon slowly down the main street. The buildings on either side of him were old but well kept up; a grocery store, loan office, barber shop. Not much in the way of commerce; the typical country community only smaller and less prosperous. The kind of town people moved away from young, and returned to old.

As he was driving past the town's main restaurant, Mason became consciously aware of what had been on the edge of his mind. Calliope music, with its rising and falling lilting rhythm. He looked to his left, beyond the stark frame two story building he was passing, and there was the carnival.

Mason stopped the car and stared at the twisting, plunging tracks of a fairly large roller coaster, the flickering quick view of a bullet-shaped gondola revolving on a long metal arm, two girls walking past carrying lush cotton candy. Looming above it all, the skeletal frame of the most gigantic Ferris wheel Mason had ever seen. He slipped the station wagon in gear again and turned onto a sun-baked dirt road that led in the direction of the carnival.

He'd expected one of the fast



dollar, portable carnivals that roamed the country during the summer months. Instead Mason found a permanent amusement park, complete with pecan shell midway and a pavillion. It wasn't a large amusement park, and there appeared to be more people milling about it than actually were there. It

struck Mason now that the town had been virtually—no, not virtually, *completely*—deserted. Everyone, apparently, was here to enjoy the carnival.

Mason parked his car, climbed out, stretched to shake off the long hours of driving, then began to walk about.

"Must be some sort of town celebration," he thought. Even though the amusement park was obviously a permanent structure, there couldn't be enough people in Grayville to support the business on such a grand scale.

Of course, Mason didn't know the geography of this backwoods, mid-west territory. Maybe there was another, larger town nearby. Or sufficient farms in the vicinity to add to the population.

"Easy enough to find out," he thought. "Ask somebody." As he began to look for someone who looked like an accurate source of information, he was suddenly aware that he was drawing mild double takes and odd, sometimes surprised glances from the smiling, excited crowd on the midway. Most of the men about him were wearing workman's clothing and the women had the ruddy, healthy stamp of country wives. The darting and laughing children seemed to be dressed in bright but ragtag fashion as they whisked in and out of the crowd.

Mason chose a thin old man with a trimmed white beard who was standing watching the children ride their endless circles on the carrousel. The old man turned at Mason's gentle hand on his shoulder.

"What's the occasion?" Mason asked.

The man stared at him, one blue eye narrowing amid sun browned wrinkles. "Carnival," he said in a puzzled voice, as if surprised by the question Mason had put.

Mason smiled at him, "But why today? Any particular reason?"

"Weather's perfect for Carnival," the man observed, squinting up at the clear, hot sky.

Behind and to the left of the smoothly revolving carrousel was a ride Mason had seen at various amusement parks; a circular platform that revolved and tilted simultaneously. Customers stood along the inside perimeter of the circular structure, their backs against a curved wall that went all the way around it. Then, as the ride revolved faster and faster, their backs were pressed firmly against the wall by centrifugal force and the floor dropped down a few feet to leave them giddily whirling unsupported from below.

"That takes a young stomach," Mason said, motioning toward the walled platform that was beginning to rotate to frantic gay music. He turned and saw that the old man was gone. Mason caught sight of him some distance up the midway, shuffling through a crowd

of women carrying picnic baskets.

Mason looked after him, shrugged, then with a glance at the carrousel walked toward the parachute drop near the other end of the short midway.

He didn't know what made him turn and look up to see the arcing form against the blazing afternoon sun. It was a young boy, slender, his arms and legs outspread as if by some timely miracle he might be able to fly.

Above the music, his scream was barely audible as he fell outward and down. Horror stricken yet calm, Mason saw that a section of wall from the circular, madly revolving, platform had given way, hurling the boy up and out as if from a huge sling. There was no way he could live.

Mason trotted in the direction of the boy's fall. The people stared at Mason as he passed them. "An accident!" he shouted. "Over there!"

When Mason reached the scene he saw that there was already a knot of people about a small figure covered by a gray blanket. From beneath the blanket only a worn blue tennis shoe protruded, twisted at an odd angle so that the sole was almost flat against the hard ground.

Three men stood with their hands on their hips, staring

down at the gray bundle, and a hugely fat woman stood off to the side with an unbelieving, horrified expression on her bloated features.

"Who was it?" Mason asked. "Does anybody know the boy's name?"

The four people simply stood as they were, staring at Mason now instead of the covered corpse.

"The boy's parents?" he suggested.

One of the men, a tall red-head, twisted his florid face in anguish and looked down again at the body. "Six *hundred* to one!" he moaned.

"His dad," a woman said near Mason's ear. He was shocked to see her indicate the man who had just spoken.

"Listen," Mason said, "somebody's sure as hell got to tell whoever's in charge."

"You see what happened?" a voice behind Mason asked.

Mason whirled, relieved to see a brown uniform and a sheriff's deputy's badge. "I saw enough to know what happened," Mason said. "A section of wall on that centrifugal force ride gave way and the boy was thrown through the air."

Another man wearing a brown uniform walked toward them, a heavy set, muscular man with short cropped, frizzy blond hair and a lit cigar.

"This man saw it happen, Sheriff," the first brown uniform said.

"Ever'thing?"

"Most."

"I'll be glad to sign a statement," Mason said. "Any cooperation I can give."

"I'm Sheriff Garrity." The muscular man stuck out his hand. "This is Deputy Lem Norten."

Mason shook the hand. "Larry Mason."

"Drivin' through, Mr. Mason?" the sheriff asked.

"I was, and I saw the carnival. Came over to investigate and I was walking around and just happened to glance up."

A drab looking tan ambulance arrived on the scene then, and Mason watched the two attendants begin the task of transferring the small body.

"You better come along back to my office," the sheriff said.

"Sure, anything."

Mason began to walk alongside the sheriff, noticing that the deputy walked a few feet behind and to the left, his hand resting casually on the butt of his holstered revolver. As they neared the amusement park exit, Mason turned his head and saw the white bearded old man leaning on the fence again watching the children on the carrousel.

Mason sat in the front of the

patrol car with the sheriff, while the deputy sat in back, directly behind Mason. There was an unseen intensity about the man that made the back of Mason's neck itch.

"On vacation?" the sheriff asked, as the car turned onto the main street.

"Right," Mason said. "Decided just to drive around and see this part of the country."

"Where's the family?"

"No family," Mason said. "Not much time for one. I'm a reporter, and I guess you'd have to say I'm married to my work."

Sheriff Garrity turned off the main road, down a narrow alley between two tall frame buildings. He turned the smoothly running patrol car to drive down a gravel road parallel to the backs of Grayville's main street establishments. Then the Sheriff wheeled abruptly into a space in the rear of a freshly painted two story building and cut the car's engine.

Mason walked between Garrity and his deputy up some concrete steps and through a rear door. "Do you know the boy?" he asked.

"Yep," the sheriff said, "young Will Cooper. Twelve years old."

"It's a damn shame," Mason said. "I hate to see a thing like that happen."

(Please turn to page 124)

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The other two men were silent as they ushered Mason into a large room off the hall. There was a gigantic old-fashioned roll top desk along one wall, cluttered with papers. On the opposite wall were filing cabinets and a row of bookshelves. An electric typewriter, the only modern thing in the room, sat on a stand next to the desk in a dusty, swirling shaft of sunlight that angled down through curtained windows.

The deputy walked past the bookshelves and held another door open for Garrity and Mason. Down some wooden steps then, directly into a small office with a bare metal desk. Behind the desk was a gleaming cell door, open.

"You'll want me to sign a statement, I suppose," Mason said.

"I suppose we'll want you to place the contents of your pockets on the desk," the sheriff said.

Mason was frozen in surprise for a moment, before the indignation set in.

"What is this?" he asked, moving closer to Sheriff Garrity. "Are you telling me you intend to hold me in jail?"

"Remove your belt, too, Mr. Mason."

Mason stiffened in anger, sensed the deputy moving up to stand behind him. Sheriff Gar-

rity leaned with both hairy-knuckled fists on the bare desk and stared at him with the impassiveness of the professional law officer, waiting for his command to be obeyed.

Mason sighed and complied. He placed his wallet, keys and loose change on the desk, then removed his belt and laid it coiled beside them. "Wristwatch too?" he asked.

Sheriff Garrity nodded.

"I'd like to call my lawyer now," Mason said, slipping off his watch and dropping it on top of his closed wallet.

"This way, Mr. Mason," the sheriff said.

Mason didn't even have time to struggle. Sheriff Garrity suddenly had him by one arm, the deputy by the other, and he was moved the few feet that placed him on the other side of the jail cell's threshold. The iron bars closed on him with the customary clang.

"Now just a minute!" Mason yelled, gripping the cold bars.

Ignoring him, the sheriff and his deputy jogged up the wooden stairs, through the door to the old-fashioned office and were gone.

MASON TURNED to see that he was in a cell about ten feet square, with a cot, toilet facilities, and a small plastic chair and table. That was all.

Mason bowed his head, walked over and sat down on the firm cot to stare at the smooth cement floor, his thoughts circling like the carrousel.

Little more than an hour passed before Sheriff Garrity reappeared at the top of the wooden steps, looked placidly at Mason and walked down jingling a ring of keys.

"Here to release me?" Mason asked.

"Not here to beat you with a rubber hose," the sheriff said, fitting a long metal key in the door. He swung the door wide. "C'mon upstairs."

Mason walked ahead of the sheriff, up the wooden steps and into the large old-fashioned office. Sheriff Garrity waved a hand toward a small chair near the big roll top desk, and Mason sat down. He wondered at the possibilities. Had someone in authority realized they'd seriously violated his rights and decided to try to make it up to him in some way that would keep things quiet? Or was he going to be interrogated? Or formally booked on some fantastic charge?

"I'll be outside by the door," Sheriff Garrity said, and left Mason alone.

The office was quiet, restful, warm and thick with the golden sunlight that poured through the wide windows.

Probably the windows were nailed shut, but Mason could pick up a piece of furniture, smash the glass. And have Garrity hear the noise and shoot him down before he could make another move? Was that what they wanted? Mason sat where he was and only looked out at the green of the treetops outside the windows.

The office door opened and a small, wiry man in his late sixties wearing a rumpled dark suit and vest entered. He had a graying mustache that matched thick eyebrows, and there was an angular shrewdness about his lined features and alert gray eyes. He nodded at Mason and smiled a faint, rather wise smile that narrowed one eye.

"I'm Ben Burdell, Mr. Mason, owner and editor of *The Clarion Call*."

Mason stood, shook the extended dry, strong hand and sat back down. Burdell sat in the big, comfortable looking leather swivel chair at the roll top desk and turned it so he was facing Mason across the corner of a small wooden table that had a stack of yellowed file folders piled at the other end.

Mason remembered the front of the building then; large, overly ornate, with the newspaper's name lettered on a darkened brass plaque over the entrance. He was sure he was

in that building; a sheriff's office and hold-over cells in the basement of a newspaper office didn't seem all that unusual for a small town, and the location, from what he could tell as they'd approached from the rear, seemed about right.

"That's where you are," Burdell said, looking speculatively at him from beneath a cocked eyebrow, "in the offices of *The Clarion Call*."

"And you're going to explain this?" Mason asked.

Burdell nodded. "What you haven't figured out by now. You've been thinking down in that cell, haven't you?"

"Some."

Burdell gave a crooked smile. "One old newspaperman can't fool another. You're a trained journalist. You saw what happened, and the deputy tells me you heard what Al Cooper said over the body of his boy."

"'Six hundred to one'," Mason said, "is a curious thing to remark when you're looking down at your dead son."

Burdell leaned back in the leather chair. "I'm glad you're leveling with me, Mason." He sighed and rubbed tan knuckles across his chin. "Times are kind of hard right now in this country. Then, too, there's the power of tradition. Humans can be bound tightly by tradition; we need tradition."

Mason sat still in his chair, watching the wizened editor.

"Of course, there are better reasons than tradition—sound economic reasons. Only towns of a certain population qualify for the big money in the State Aid to Small Communities annual grant. And Grayville only has two real industries, Mason: the lead mines and the plant that prints this newspaper. Neither makes gigantic profits, so there's not much money floating around. People leave town now and then, but they tend to come back, and there's just so many jobs at the paper and the mines, just so much little business here that can earn enough to stay open."

"What about the amusement park?" Mason asked.

Burdell looked at him sharply. "Only open once a year, for one day in the summer. The day you happened to be driving through and doing some professional snooping."

"So the community can only support 'X' number of citizens," Mason said.

"Support them in a reasonably decent fashion." Burdell cocked his head to one side as he peered across the small table. "Do you know what animals do when they exist in an area with limited food supply, Mason? The herd thins out. That's nature's way. They re-

duce in numbers until there's adequate food."

"Nature's way," Mason said.

"Instead of nature," Burdell went on, "we here in Grayville have the annual Carnival. The odds on each of the rides are painted on the ticket booth—I'm sure you noticed them, though you probably didn't realize at the time what they were. Three hundred to one on the Ferris wheel, four hundred to one on the roller coaster, and so on. No one knows when it will happen or to whom."

"But why does anybody go on the rides?" Mason asked, not really able yet to believe completely what this man was calmly telling him.

Burdell looked at him as if surprised Mason didn't understand. "Why, danger is the reason people go on any of those rides anywhere anytime. We here in Grayville just take it a step further. Once a citizen passes twelve years of age, he or she can go on the rides of their own choice. It was voted on once, sometime long ago in the town hall."

"So the townspeople risk their lives and the lives of their children to—prune the community . . ." Mason shook his head incredulously. It was insane, somehow terrifying, and true.

"Oh, I'm afraid it's nothing so selfless and noble as that," Burdell said. "It's human nature. You see, no one really ever thinks it will happen to him or her, always to someone else. The human animal can't actually conceive of his own personal mortality. We even have a ride with ten to one odds, Mason, 'The Pit And The Pail'. People go on it—not many, but some. Like all the other rides, the odds are accurate and the elimination is neat, quick and sure."

"And they'll take the chance because the odds are in their favor."

Burdell smiled and shook his head no. "They'll take the chance even if the odds are *against* them. The 'sooner or later' is always 'later'. If you sent ten soldiers on a dangerous mission and told them only one would return, each of the ten would think he was that man. That's how the human mind works."

"And Grayville takes advantage of it." Mason understood what the old editor was saying, could see the terrible perverse logic in it. "But now the most important question to me. What happens when somebody discovers what's going on? Surely I'm not the first."

"No, you're not the first, Mason. And don't worry, we're

not murderers. There's no selection in our Carnival—it merely accelerates the life and death cycle for the benefit of the community.”

“You can't really intend to hold me for the rest of my natural life in that cell.”

“The *Clarion Call* has a circulation that includes several nearby towns larger than Grayville, Mason. If I raise the annual subscription rate ten cents a month, the amount will easily supply the modest expenses for food and clothing you'd need in your cell. We could incarcerate you for life—or we could release you.”

Mason looked into the editor's shrewd, level eyes, knew he might as well be candid. “I'm a journalist. I'd talk.”

“Who'd believe you?” Burdell asked. “The town easily alters records of births and deaths. We know no one would believe you because we've released people like you before, people who've found out. The cells downstairs are empty.”

“Then why not release me?”

“We can't afford to release *too* many,” Burdell said, chewing briefly on his moustache.

“Eventually one of you *would* be believed enough to cause serious trouble. The odds, you see.

A mild summer breeze stirred outside the windows, and the ticking of an unseen clock filled the room. “So how do you decide?” Mason asked.

“We don't decide. You do, one time, like all the others.” Burdell reached into the roll top desk's center drawer and removed an old Colt six-shot revolver. He flipped out the gun's empty cylinder and inserted four gleaming, deadly looking cartridges at random. The remaining two chambers in the cylinder he left empty. After replacing the cylinder and spinning it a few times, he carefully laid the gun on the table before Mason.

“You either spend the rest of your life imprisoned here,” Burdell said, “or you hold the gun to your temple and pull the trigger that one way or another sets you free.”

He leaned back and folded his arms, a curious, expectant look in his narrow gray eyes. “Two to one, Mason. Not bad odds.”

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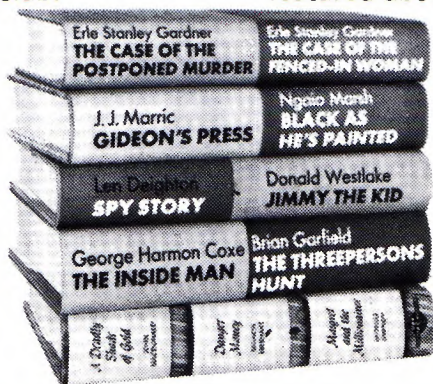
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